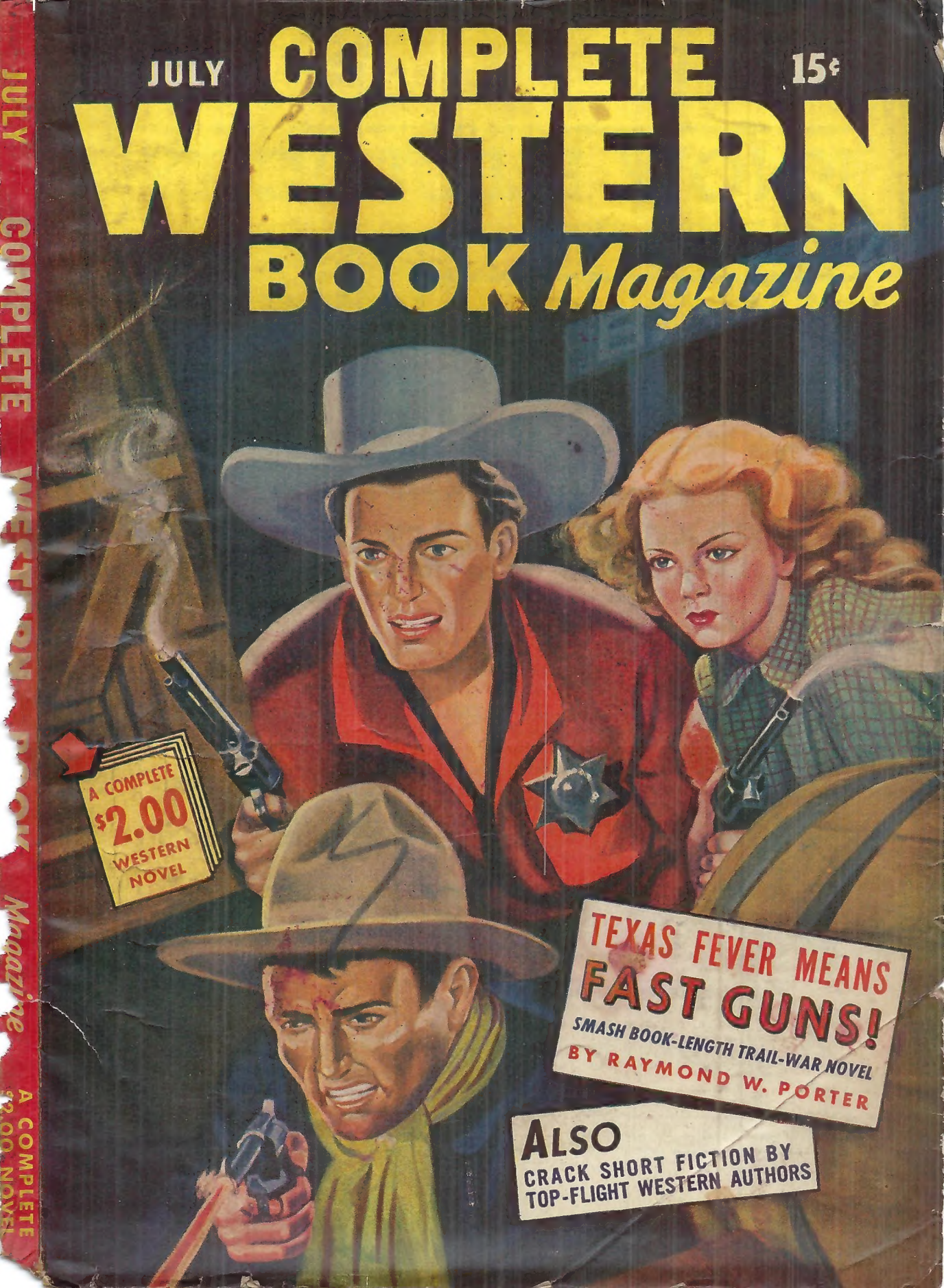
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COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

VOL. 15 NO. 7 | A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE | JULY, 1944

ROBERT O. ERISMAN
Editor

★ ★ GREAT RANGE-WAR NOVEL ★ ★ Page

TEXAS FEVER MEANS FAST GUNS!

by Raymond W. Porter 8

This kid had an untamed, go-to-hell look in his eye, and he wore his holster tied-down-hard. This kid was tough in a country where every second man was a Colt-handy killer, and the only law he knew was a bullet-notched .45 hammering in his right hand!

★ ★ SMASHING HOT-LEAD NOVELETTE ★ ★

Six-Gun Citizens for Satan's Wild-Town .....by George Jensen 81

No, these were not typical range-hogs, not those brimstone sons that moved in on a town behind guns and took it and ruled it with hot lead . . . No, these land-grabbers were this wild-town's leading citizens!

★ ★ THRILLING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

Tinhorn Triggers.....by Melvin W. Holt 65

The town wasn't big enough for both of them. Either Danker or Canfield was going to have to holster steel or swallow lead . . .

Bushwhack Warrant.....by Peter Dawson 68

It was a fine high-powered weapon, Mike Kilgrew's Winchester, and mebbeso it was meant to kill law-breakers and mebbeso it was meant to kill law-backers!

COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK MAGAZINE, published quarterly by Newsstand Publications, Inc. Office of publication, 4600 Diversey Avenue, Chicago, Ill. Editorial and executive offices, 350 Fifth Ave., Empire State Bldg., N. Y., N. Y., Martin Goodman, Pres. Entered as second class matter October 16, 1933, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1943, by Newsstand Publications, Inc. Title registered at the U. S. Patent Office, Washington, D. C. Yearly subscription, 90 cents. Single copies 15 cents. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts.
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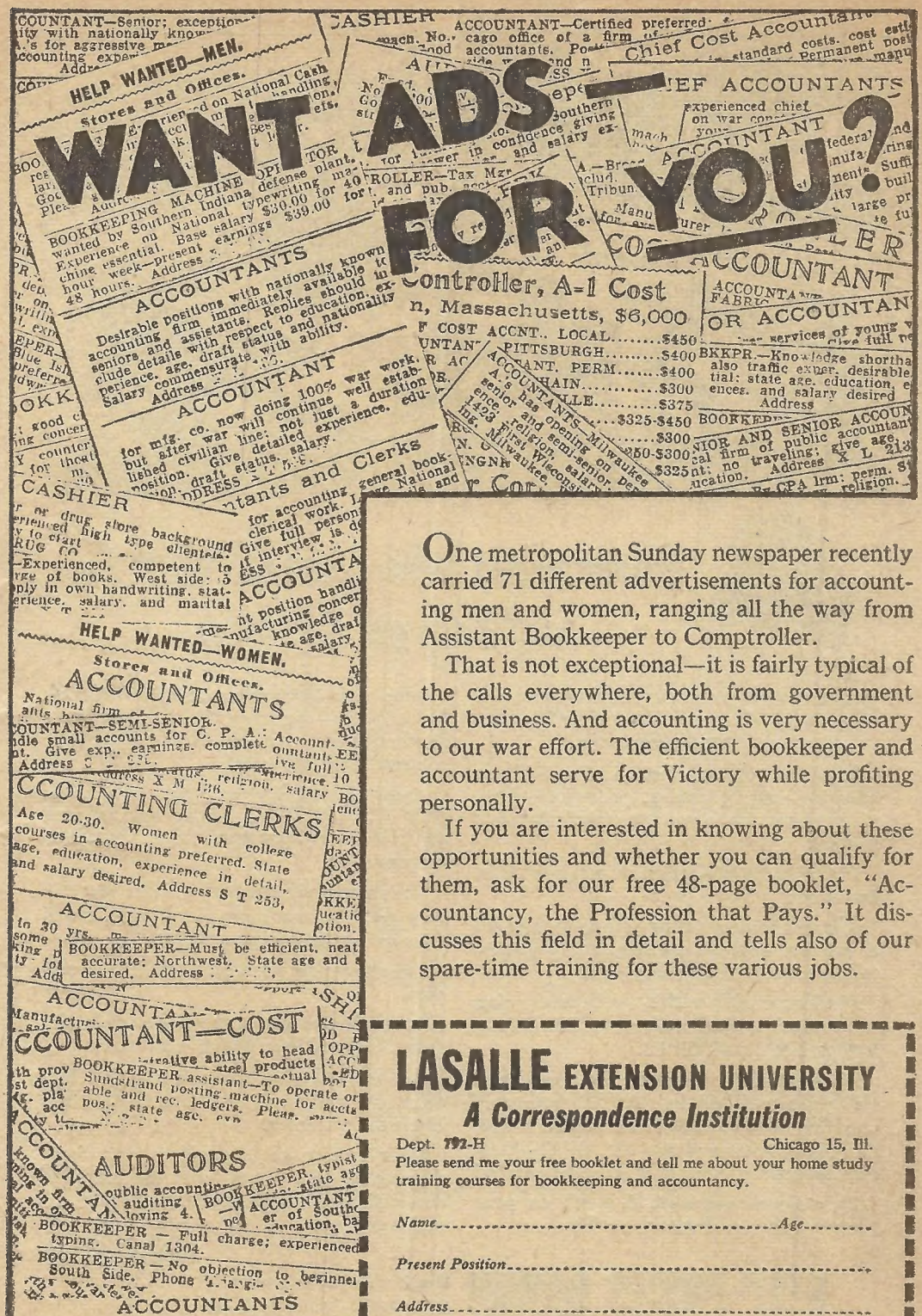
JULY, 1944—ISSUE



One metropolitan Sunday newspaper recently carried 71 different advertisements for accounting men and women, ranging all the way from Assistant Bookkeeper to Comptroller.

That is not exceptional—it is fairly typical of the calls everywhere, both from government and business. And accounting is very necessary to our war effort. The efficient bookkeeper and accountant serve for Victory while profiting personally.

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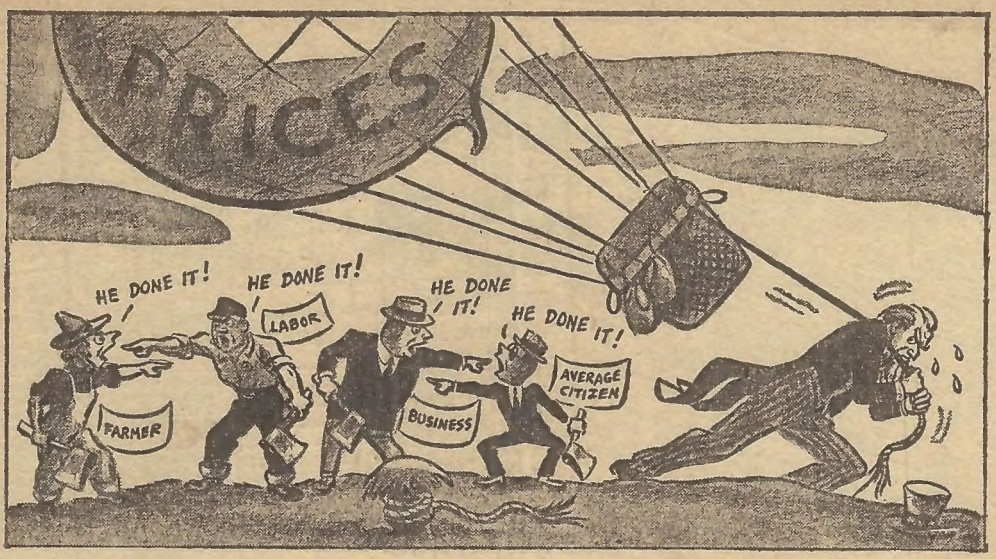

Never mind "who done it"—pitch in and help get it down!

THIS IS YOUR UNCLE SAM talking—but I'm going to talk to you like a DUTCH uncle, to keep all of us from going broke.

Ever since the Axis hauled off and hit us when we weren't looking, prices have been nudging upwards. Not rising awfully fast, but RISING.

If this keeps up—we're all going to be in hot water.

The government's done a lot to keep prices down. That's what price ceilings and wage controls are for. Rationing helps, too.

But let me tell you this—we're *never* going to keep prices down unless we ALL help—EVERY LAST ONE OF US.

All right, then. Here are the seven rules we've got to follow as GOSPEL from now until this war is over. Not some of them—ALL of them. Not some of us—ALL OF US, farmers, businessmen, laborers, white collar workers!

Buy only what you need. A patch on your pants is a badge of honor these days.

Keep your OWN prices DOWN. Don't ask higher prices—for your own labor, your own services, or goods you sell. Resist all pressure to force YOUR prices up!

Never pay a penny more than the ceiling price for ANYTHING. Don't buy rationed goods without giving up the right amount of coupons.

Pay your taxes willingly, no matter how stiff they get. This war's got to be paid for and *taxes are the cheapest way to do it.*

Pay off your old debts. Don't make any new ones.

Start a savings account and make regular deposits. Buy and keep up life insurance.

Buy War Bonds and hold on to them. Buy them with dimes and dollars it HURTS like blazes to do without.

Start making these sacrifices now—keep them up for the duration—and this country of ours will be sitting pretty after the war . . . *and so will you.*

Uncle Sam

KEEP PRICES DOWN!

Use it up • Wear it out
Make it do • Or do without

This advertisement, prepared by the War Advertising Council, is contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

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These terrible confessions, these ghastly self-revelations, were written into this astounding scientific, first-hand psychoanalysis of Hitler by Dr. Krueger, his own physician, after he fled Germany to save himself from the Hitler purge. And the book was written only in the hope that widespread detailed knowledge of Hitler's abysmal cruelties of body, mind, and soul would incense the world enough to help PURGE Hitler.

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Hitler's Personal Physician for 15 years
Introduction by OTTO STRASSER

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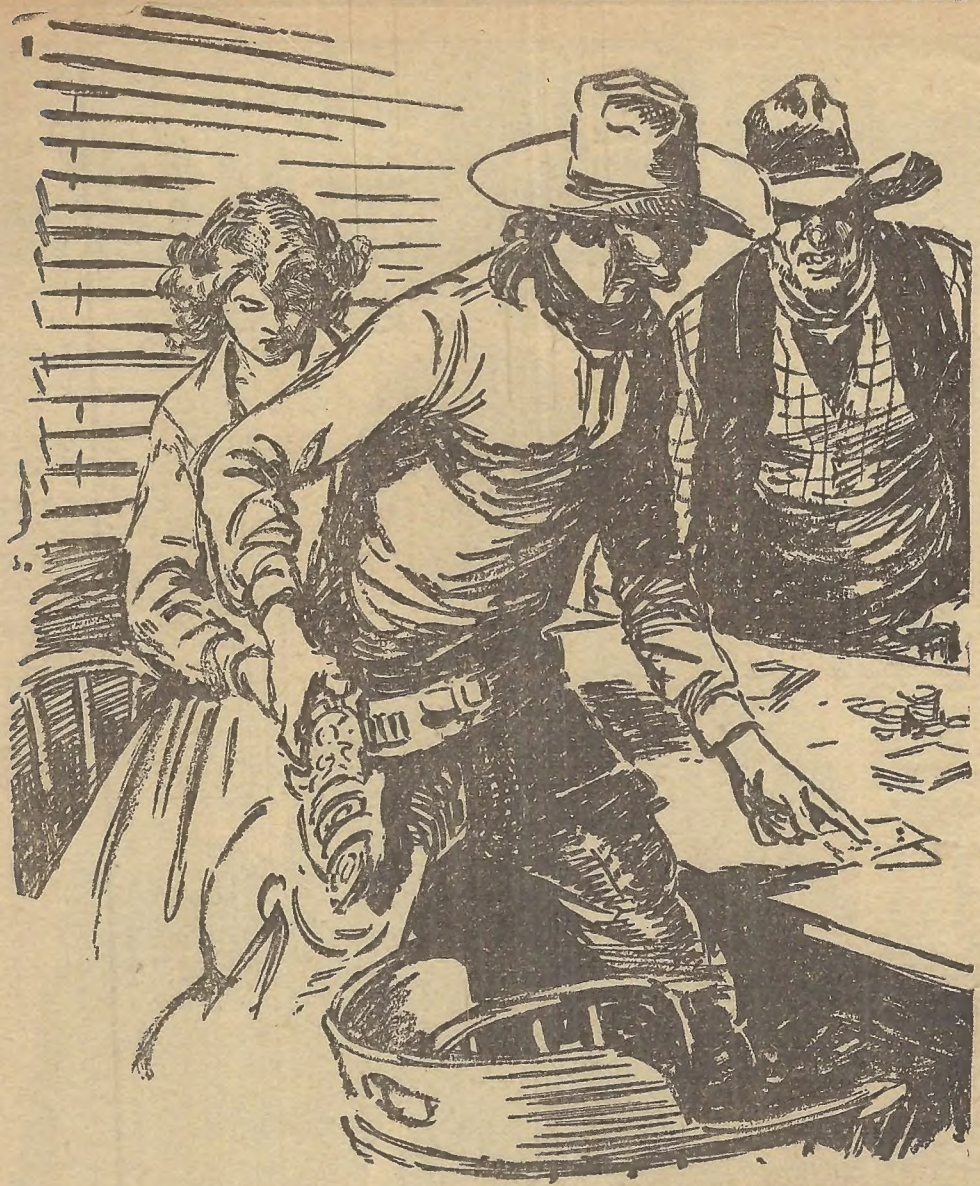
TEXAS FEVER MEANS



"I seen you palm that card!" Trotter snarled, and

DO YOU know what it means to get up at six o'clock every morning to milk two cows and then milk them again at six o'clock every night? Every morning and every night, with no time off for Sundays, holidays, or vacations?

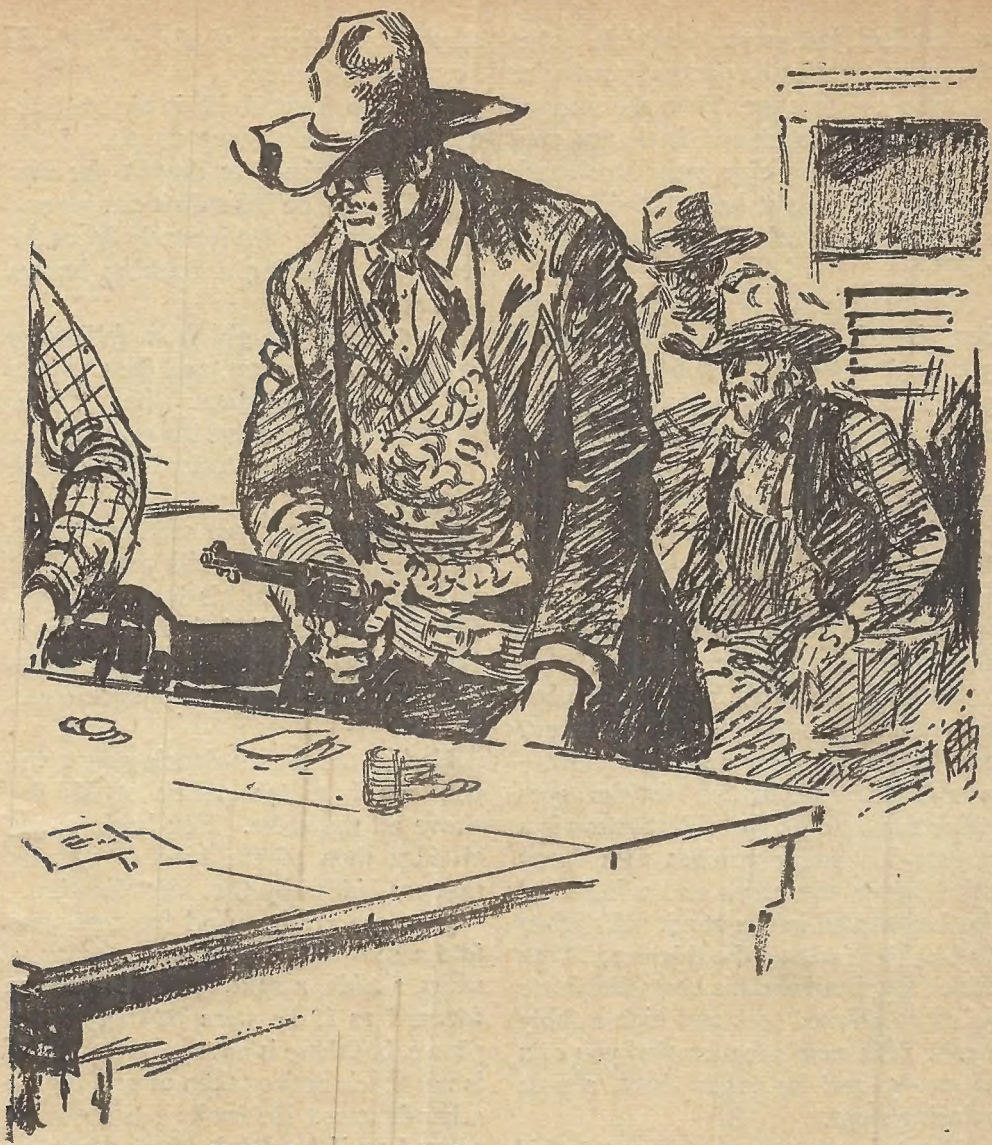
Ask Kent Keith. He knows. He started doing it when he was twelve years old and kept it up till he was eighteen.

Do you have any idea how much fertilizer two cows can produce? Ask Kent Keith. Morning and night he cleaned that cow lot with wheel barrow and scoop shovel, spreading the fertilizer over the garden, around the fruit trees, and in the flower beds.

THE ONLY LAW THIS KID KNEW WAS A BULLET-NOTCHED

FAST GUNS!

By RAYMOND W. PORTER



went for his gun—cold, like that, cold and fast!

Was this range-baron so big and tough, then, no man dared cross him? Not even this kid with the untamed, go-to-hell look in his eye—this kid who was called gun-wizard in a country where every second man was a Colt-handy killer?

Did you ever have a cow hit you in the face with her tail? It's like a whip and if you don't keep your head rammed in her flank, she'll do it several times while you're milking her, especially if the flies are bad.

Kent used to tie a rope around her tail, run it between her legs, and then put his foot on it. The old cow couldn't switch her tail that way, but she would

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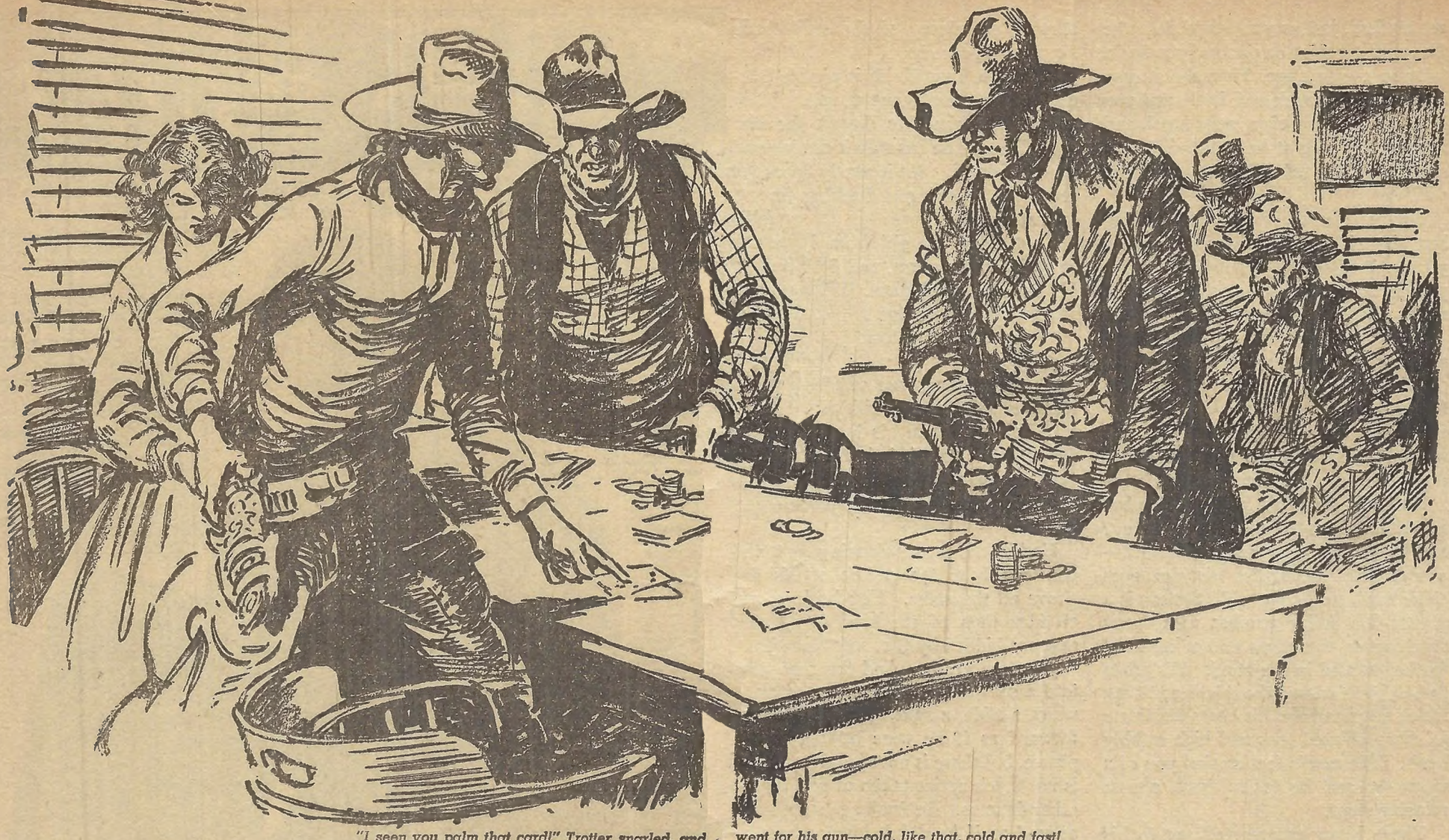

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get restless, just as you would do if the flies were gnawing on you and you had a tail you couldn't use. Then she stomps around, moves back and forth, and you have to keep moving your stool and bucket, hollering at her, "So! So! You son-of-a-so and so! I'll beat your head off!"

But you don't. If you start beating her, she will hold up her milk, and if you do it often she will fall off in her production. That is, her production of milk. Not her production of fertilizer.

If you want to know anything at all about milk cows, ask Kent Keith. Just to look at him, you might not take him for an expert on milk cows, and certainly you wouldn't associate him with wheel barrows and fertilizer. Nor garden plots, nor trees, nor flowers.

He is not domestic looking. He has an untamed, go-to-hell look in his eye and he wears a very fancy silk shirt—a soft blue that makes his blue eyes shine hard and bright. His Stetson is a twenty-five dollar number with fancy stitching on the edges and a little red feather tucked in the band. His pants fit him tight around the thighs and hips, which are small and his boots terminate in sharp pointed toes and high wobbly heels. The man's feet remind you of a woman's, and he takes short, almost mincing steps.

There is an exaggerated sag to his gun belt. You think it is going to slip off as he walks along, but you see that it is tied to his leg with a small leather strap around the bottom of the holster. But that isn't to keep from losing the gun. He won't lose it. Don't worry.

He makes his way across the dance floor at the Beef Stew, daintily stepping around the dancing couples. It's a good idea to get out of the dancers' way, here at the Beef Stew. They dance like runaway horses. They dance as if they were stomping at snakes. They yell. Maybe they've got snake bite. If so, they've got plenty of the stuff that's supposed to cure it.

Although Kent Keith is nimble-footed, he can't avoid one couple. They smash into him. It doesn't jar him much because he has seen it coming and braces himself. But it nearly floors the gent who is doing a bucking bronco step at the time.

Kent keeps the girl from falling by thrusting out an arm, and then he lifts his hat and apologizes. Her partner regains his balance and swings on Kent.

"Why don't you look where you're goin', you—"

He called Kent one of those things Kent used to call the milk cows. Kent still has his hat in his hand, but you may have noticed it is in his left hand. And he isn't left-handed. He keeps his right hand free for just such emergencies.

He hits the bronco-dancing gent, and you can hear the smack of his fist above all the noise. You begin to get an idea then of the kind of muscles that are hidden by that soft blue silk.

Just one crack. And the man goes into a solo dance—three steps back, a whirl, a slide, a split. His head comes forward as if he were bowing to applause, but there is not applause. There is not much notice taken of him by the other dancers. He finally gets up, looks around as if he didn't know where he was, and walks off toward the bar.

Kent said, "I'm might sorry."

THE girl said, "I'm not. I was gettin' tired dancin', anyway." She glanced at Kent speculatively. "With him," she added.

Kent smiled politely, replaced his hat and walked on. He was headed for the gambling tables. He had ten dollars. He had to win some money or go to work.

Whenever Kent thought about going to work, he thought about the two milk

cows. He had done other kinds of work in these later years, much of it pleasant, but he was still unwilling to concede that there was anything noble about work, especially work on a cow ranch. He hated cows, and wanted to have nothing whatever to do with them.

So he was very careful with that ten dollars. He watched the chuck-a-luck game for awhile, then moved on to the roulette table. He asked for five dollars worth of chips, got a scornful glance from the house man and one blue chip. He asked for five red ones instead.

He put one of them on the red—that was for the red feather in his hat. He won, let it ride, and won again. Six straight times the winning number was red. Kent didn't push his luck too far He dropped back to a dollar, lost.

He smiled. Tonight he felt lucky. For an hour and a half he stayed at the roulette table, and then he cashed in four hundred and thirty dollars worth of chips.

At the black-jack table he picked up a hundred and fifty dollars more. Yes, this was his lucky night. He had enough now to get into a real game. Poker.

There were three poker tables. At the first, the take-out was ten dollars, at another it was a hundred, and at the third it was five hundred. There were no sweaters at the big game, but several watch the play from a discreet distance. Kent joined them. He studied the players.

One of them stood out like a big white-faced bull in a herd of scrawny cows. He bellowed and snorted and fairly pawed the floor. He was impatient and domineering and mad. He was losing, and he was a bad loser.

A toothy, sallow-faced man had most of the chips stacked in front of him, and he had settled down behind them as if they were a bulwark between him and the bedeviling loser. When the latter pushed in all of his remaining chips and lost them, he acted as if he were going to jump over the table.

"You're the damdest, luckiest knothead I ever seen!" he bellowed.

For a winner, the other man seemed most unhappy.

"Can I help it if I'm lucky?" he asked.

"You're more'n lucky! You stay on nothin' and you draw out on me every time!"

"It's just the way they're runnin' tonight, Trotter. They're runnin' against you. I told you, you ought to of quit a long time ago."

"You've been wantin' to quit because you're away ahead. But you ain't quittin', understand? You're goin' to give me a chance to get even!" He glared at a man who was leaning against the wall. "Get me a pencil and a piece of paper, Skid!"

Skid was flat-faced and dead-eyed. He looked like something coiled up in the sun, moving his head one way and then another, and he spat a thin black jet of tobacco juice which was like a forked tongue. He glided off through the crowd.

"This ain't your night, Trotter. Why don't you wait till tomorrow night?" whined the toothy winner.

"You won't be here tomorrow night. You'll never come back if you get out of here."

"Like as if I could stay away, if I wanted to! I never win. I come back the next night and lose it all."

Skid returned with pencil and paper. The big man scribbled, "IOU $1,000—Trotter Bates."

"You want me to—to take that, Trotter?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"N-nothin'. It's just that I don't like to play against my own money."

"Your own money hell! That's my money you've got. And here's where I get some of it back."

KENT watched the exhibition of bad poker playing with a little more feeling than he usually permitted himself in merely watching a game. He had been amused to start with, then surprised and disgusted. This was more like a penn ante game in a bunkhouse.

It was his first visit to the Beef Stew, his first time in this town of Arapahoe. He had been in many similar towns and almost identical gambling houses. They followed a rigid pattern, not only in appearance but in the conduct of their business.

There were many rules, not written and seldom spoken, which all men observed. Boiled down, they became the one rule of good sportsmanship. Of course there were cheats and there were bad losers, but they were dealt with promptly when exposed, either by the management or the players.

Here was a man who was ruining a game, inflicting his bad disposition on everybody, with only a feeble protest from the man on whom he was forcing his IOU. The other players had said nothing.

Who was this man, anyway? Was he so important nobody dared to cross him, or so tough? He looked both important and tough, but here in this country one man was just about as important as another, and everybody had to be tough.

Kent didn't want in this game. He didn't want to get into trouble, and he knew he would if he sat down at the same table with this Trotter Bates. So he went back to the hundred-dollar table and waited for an empty chair.

This was a quiet, business-like game, and Kent watched it without interest. He could hear the bellowing voice from this other table and he kept asking himself why somebody didn't throw the fellow out. He thought: Maybe I'll have to do it, myself.

But why should he do it? Because he didn't like the way the big man talked, the way he combed his hair?

"You've been around too much to let this get under your skin," he argued with himself. You've seen Big Mouths before. As long as they talk to somebody else, you don't have to listen.

But he did listen.

"Get another deck, dammit!" yelled Trotter Bates. He scooped the cards from the table and threw them in the face of the man with the horsey teeth.

"Now, take it easy, Trotter—"

"You're the one that's takin' it easy, Fogle! All you do is lay 'em down and rake 'em in. Somethin' funny's goin' on here, somethin' mighty damned funny!"

Kent saw the victim being prepared for the sacrifice, and he told himself he ought to stop it. Should he? Was he the sheriff? Had somebody hired him as a bouncer or a bodyguard?

Not yet! And until they did—

"Let's see that card!" bellowed Trotter Bates.

"Wait! Trotter—!"

"I seen you palm it, you dirty crook!"

The bystanders, including Kent, had all the warning they needed. They got out of the way. They watched the killing. It was a planned, deliberate killing. It had been announced in advance, like a sporting event. But sportsmanship was a thing the winning contestant didn't know about. He had lost, and he had decided to kill the winner.

Just where should an innocent bystander come in on this, and how innocent is a bystander, anyway, when he watches a killing and does nothing to stop it? Kent asked himself this question but he had no answer. He had seen killings before, and they always had a morbid effect on him, reminding him of how quickly death strikes and how swiftly a man must act to keep

out of the way. He had been quick enough so far. With a gun he was quick enough, but there were so many other things over which a man had no control, so that he never knew what to expect.

A FIGHT might be forced on a man any minute—as it was on the poor devil lying there on the floor. He had made very little effort to defend himself. He had seemed to realize he was doomed, as did the others who watched it.

Kent thought the killer should have had more competition—much more. Kent believed that he could give him some. There was an itching in the palm of his right hand, which only the carved handle of his forty-five could satisfy. He moved forward.

"What's it to you?" said a soft voice behind him. It was the girl whose partner he had bumped. She was tall and red-headed. There was a detached sort of curiosity in her manner, and a poised maturity. This one was no spring chicken. She was talking sense; she made him feel a little foolish.

"Not a thing, sister. And thanks for remindin' me."

She said, "How did you manage to live so long?"

"By livin' right. No liquor. No wild women."

"You'd live a lot longer with liquor and wild women than with startin' fights."

"I haven't started any fights."

"No. You walked in here thirty minutes ago. You knocked one man for a loop. You're ready to shoot up another one. You don't start fights?"

"No."

"Maybe you just finish 'em."

It was just talk. But it was easing the tension in him and diverting his mind from the man called Trotter Bates.

Trotter Bates was rumbling off through the crowd and the dead man was being carried away with an efficiency which suggested good house management. The operator of the roulette wheel was advising players to get their bets down and the black-jack dealer was coaxing back his brood. In a very few minutes order was restored and business was going on as usual.

All of the chairs at the five-hundred-dollar table were occupied but one; that was where the victim had sat. It stood significantly empty and shunned.

Kent moved toward it.

"You goin' to play?" the girl asked.

He nodded.

"In that chair?"

"Why not?"

She shrugged, then stepped back out of his way when it was plain that she no longer interested him.

They looked at him like an interloper when he pulled the chair back and sat down, and he had a peculiar feeling of being under observation of eyes that he could not see. He felt that he had done a brash thing, as if he were violating some precinct sacred to the dead.

He imagined there was still warmth in the chair, warmth from a body that was now growing cold. A hot seat, he thought. I'm in a hot seat.

Shaking off this disturbing sensation, he counted out five hundred dollars and settled down to the business at hand. Soon he was deep in the game, giving all of his study to the play and the players. In a poker game he considered it as important to study the players as the cards. He classified the man who sat opposite him, in the chair vacated by Trotter Bates, as another poor loser.

There was no bellowing on his part, no snorts and groans. He was silent, except for a necessary word now and then. "Two—One—Three" when he

drew his cards. Once he stood pat and merely shook his head. When he bet, he let the chips speak for themselves. When he passed, he merely tossed in the cards.

He was a plunger and seldom called a bet. Either he laid down his cards or he raised. He got caught on a couple of big bluffs, but once he had them.

After the first long deliberate stare at Kent, this man didn't look at him again. Kent couldn't see his eyes. They were set far back beneath frosty brows, and further shielded by heavy lashless lids. He looked like a blind man, holding his head at an angle as if he were listening intently all the time. Tiny purple veins netted his high cheek bones. When he lost these veins swelled into a solid mass of dark color resembling a bruise.

HIS name, Kent learned from the talk, was Kilgore, and he interested Kent more than any of the others because he was harder to judge. Twice Kent locked horns with him, driving the others from the betting, and won both times. There was almost five hundred dollars in one pot, over a thousand in the next one.

Kent lost a few big ones, but he won far more than he lost. Kilgore kept buying chips, kept silent, kept listening. The more he lost, the more he bet. His desperation drove him into some disastrous bluffs. He couldn't win a pot. Kent couldn't lose. More and more they paired off, with the others dropping out.

Kent had played a lot of poker, but not with this kind of money. There was probably more stacked in front of him than all of his previous winnings. And he was nervous. Sweat trickled from beneath his hatband, seeped through his shirt, and popped out on the calves of his legs.

Again he remembered that he had taken over a dead man's chair. No wonder it had been warm to start with. The other man had been sweating too. Kent wondered if the dead man was any hotter now.

He stared across the table at the sockets of his "eyeless" opponent. It was like the head of a skeleton. Was he playing with a dead man? Were the fires of hell licking around them?

Hey! Hey! Get hold of yourself, you fool! You're in a big game. You're winning big money. Hang onto it. Play 'em close to your belt, now . . .

He saw a pair of eyes in those empty sockets—away back in them, lighting them like distant fires in a canyon at night. "I've got five hundred head of cattle worth ten thousand dollars. Anybody'll tell you—"

The man was offering him a bit of paper. It read, "IOU—$1,000. George C. Kilgore."

A refusal was on Kent's lips when he remembered how the man in the chair he now sat in had protested. This was another game, another IOU, but there was a sinister similarity. He glanced at the faces around him; he saw leaning against the wall the man called Skid, and watched him stretch his long neck and eject his tobacco-juice venom.

It wouldn't be easy to quit this game a winner, he could see. It wouldn't be simply a matter of cashing in his chips and walking away.

"Who runs this place?" he asked.

Kilgore grunted, "Why?"

"I'd like to find out what he thinks about this IOU."

There was a long silence. Then Kilgore said, "Go get 'im, Skid."

Skid writhed himself into a reluctant retreat. For several minutes they waited, minutes that dragged sullenly. No attempt was made by the other players to go on with the game.

A short, round-faced man emerged

from the crowd, with Skid behind him. "All right, gentlemen," he said genially, "what can I do for you?"

Kent handed him the IOU. "You might cash that."

He seemed startled. "A thousand dollars? For you, Kilgore?"

Kilgore said, "For him. He's got all the money."

"You lost that much?"

"I lost a hell of a lot more'n that."

"And you still owe a thousand dollars?"

"No, but I've got to have a thousand dollars to stay in the game."

The proprietor of the Beef Stew laid the IOU carefully on the table. "Why don't you quit?"

"I'm five thousand in the hole!"

"That's better than six thousand."

"But I've got to get even!"

The other man shook his head sadly. "And if you were winning you couldn't quit as long as your luck held out. It's a vicious pastime, gentlemen, a vicious pastime." He swept them with a benevolent gaze, which came to rest on Kent.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you before." He was genial about it, but his eyes were sharp and probing.

"I just hit town. Kent Keith's the name."

"Kent Keith? Kent Keith," he repeated reflectively. "No, I've never seen you before. I used to know all my customers. They used to play poker for the fun of it. They used to drink for the fun of it. Everybody's got too much money now."

"I haven't," said Kilgore harshly.

"You've got too many cattle—like everybody else. But this cattle boom can't go on forever. There'll be a smash one of these days, mark my word."

The words that Kent marked, however, were: "You've got too many cattle."

"Then you'll cash his IOU?" he asked.

"Oh, no. You must not do that, Kilgore. You'll ruin yourself!"

"Just let me run my own business, will you?" said Kilgore.

THE genial little man rolled his head sardonically. "Of course. But you sent for me."

"I didn't send for you. He did."

Once more he considered Kent. "You're a very young man," he said. "You won't take my advice, but it's free. Don't play any more tonight. Don't push your luck too far."

Without waiting for an answer, he walked away.

"All right," growled Kilgore. "You satisfied?"

"I'm satisfied, if you are," said Kent.

"Then give me the thousand."

Kent had meant he was willing to quit. He was also willing to keep on playing. And why not? This was a golden opportunity, one of those things which might mean the turning point in a man's life.

Up until now he had been a drifter, a come-easy, go-easy traveler along the trails of the frontier, working when necessary, living every day for the new and the exciting, not thinking much about tomorrow or yesterday, just wondering what was on down the road, and finding out. There had been plenty to keep him busy. Plenty of good times, plenty of close calls. No responsibility, no drudgery. No cows to milk, no wheelbarrows to push, or fertilizer to spread.

He had thought about making a lot of money, and had come near it a few times—once in the Topanga gold strike and again in the land boom of the Sugan territory. But he had just missed it both times. He had never thought of winning a lot of money playing

poker.

But he had. Right now he had several thousand dollars, and here was a man with five hundred cattle he wanted to bet.

If there was anything in the world Kent didn't want, it was five hundred head of cattle. Every time he thought about cattle, he thought about those two milk cows. These cattle would not be milk cows, of course, but a cow was a cow as far as Kent was concerned. He wanted to have nothing whatever to do with them.

But five hundred head of cattle could be readily sold. The cattle market was booming. Men were buying cattle in Chicago and New York and London who had never seen a cow. Everybody, it seemed, wanted to get into the cattle business—everybody but Kent. If he won any cattle, he would sell them pronto. And if his luck stayed with him, he might win five hundred cattle.

Again he remembered the winner of that other game, remembered how they carried him out. He remembered that he was sitting in a dead man's chair.

Was he scared? Here was a chance to make a killing! A killing?

"Make out a bill of sale for that five hundred cattle," he said, "and we'll call it ten thousand dollars."

They settled down to a game of freeze-out—an erratic, desperate contest in which the other players wanted no part. Onlookers crowded closer, attracting still more spectators, until the table was surrounded by a circular wall of humanity which was never quite still nor entirely quiet. It was close and hot, and the rays of the lamp above the table beat down like a bright sun.

Kent was only hazily aware of the bank of curious faces and the heat and the tobacco smoke. He lost his nervousness and kept his mind on the game. He tried not to calculate his winnings, for each time he did so he felt a fresh jolt of amazement and was distracted from the game itself. It made no difference whether a chip was worth fifty cents or fifty dollars; as long as he could consider them merely as tokens he was all right. But if he let himself consider them in terms of money, he got dizzy.

It wasn't all luck, though he made some lucky draws. It was concentration. It was judgment. It was work—he had never worked so hard in his life, not even with scoop shovel and wheel barrow.

He had no idea of how much time had elapsed when he raked in the last pot. It seemed many hours, but the crowd was still there, and the hot bright light, and the drifting smoke. He looked at the chips in front of him, and was now free to let his eyes see them as money, and as cattle. Thousands of dollars, five hundred head of cattle. Stacked there on the table in front of him. All belonging to him.

HIS gloating didn't last long, for he looked at his opponent and saw the desperation on his face. Kilgore's cheeks were two ugly bruises, with the network of veins distorted into purple smears of scarcely hidden blood. The cavernous sockets of his eyes were burning with a wild light.

Suddenly he shoved back from the table and his hand dropped to his gun.

Kent watched as if he were the only onlooker, the way he had watched the final ending of the other game. He knew he ought to do something about it, just as he had known he should have done something to stop that other killing. The two incidents were so closely paralleled they seemed but one and Kent had no sense of personal danger. It was more a moral obligation on his part to protect a helpless victim that caused him to grope for his sixgun.

It was gone. The empty holster

shocked him into a vivid realization of what was happening to him. *He* was the victim. He was doomed, and had been from the start. He was sitting in a dead man's chair.

He struck the edge of the table with the palms of his hands, lifting it upward and hurtling it toward the man with the gun. And then he saw that the gun was not aimed at him. Kilgore had the weapon pointed at his own head.

The gun went off as the table smashed into him, knocking the six-shooter aside. Kilgore seemed dazed, but unhurt. He stood with the gun at a harmless angle, staring in blank astonishment over the table at Kent.

His astonishment could not have been greater than Kent's. Kent had hurled the table to protect himself, and had only realized in that same instant that Kilgore was not trying to shoot him, but was going to shoot himself.

It was a fantastic idea to Kent, who couldn't understand why any man would want to shoot himself. Suicide was a weird and unnatural thing. He didn't know how to deal with a man like that, but he felt compelled to do something.

An instant before, under what he regarded as a threat to his own life, he would have killed the man. Now, with almost equal determination, he wanted to save his life. Talking to him was out of the question; there was nothing to say. There was just one thing to do —get the gun away from him.

He was over the table in one leap. Gilmore brought the gun down, chopping at Kent's head. The crazed man was now fighting instinctively against an attack. Here was something Kent could understand and compete against. He slugged and wrestled Kilgore to the floor, and finally twisted the gun from his hand.

Crouching on the floor, Kilgore cried, "Wha'd you do that for?"

Kent growled, "Get hold of yourself!"

"Wha'd you do it for? Didn't you do enough to me? What did you have to do this for?"

It was too much to expect him to be grateful to Kent for saving his life, but his humiliation was unexpectedly painful. He got to his feet, glared wildly about, and then plunged through the crowd. Nobody spoke or tried to stop him as he made his way to the door and disappeared.

Kent began a frantic collection of his winnings. He found the trampled bill of sale still legible and untorn. He scooped the scattered poker chips into his hat and was distressed with the eagerness with which some men wanted to help him.

He cursed himself for upsetting the table and wished fervently that he had let Kilgore shoot himself. It didn't help much to remind himself that when he upset the table he had thought Kilgore was going to shoot him.

When he got through he had a hatful of chips, but he knew that he had lost a lot of them. He had no record of how many had been bought originally, and all he could do was cash in what he had.

The houseman who had banked the game was not in sight, so Kent took his winnings to the cashier's cage.

"You'll have to see Paddy about that," said the cashier.

"Who?"

"Paddy Trimm. The boss." He pointed. "Straight back."

"What do I have to see him for?"

"I haven't got that much money."

Kent was unreasonably furious and a little panicky. Were they trying to give him the run-around?

As he walked toward the rear of the house, carrying his hat full of poker chips, he drew much envious attention. He didn't like it. He especially resented the way he was being watched

by the fellow called Skid, whose flat snake-like head was weaving above the crowd.

WITH his right arm Kent brushed the gun in his holster—Kilgore's gun—and was glad he had it. Somebody wanted him disarmed, bad enough to run the risk of lifting his gun while he was absorbed in the poker game. It took an expert to do that. He had heard of such things being done, but had never believed it could happen to him.

Who had done it, and why? Somebody who had expected the game to wind up in a fight had wanted him killed, or had wanted to prevent his killing somebody.

He did not speculate long on this mystery, for his immediate concern was getting the money.

As he circled the dance floor, the red-headed girl danced past, her eyes on him. There was nothing coquettish about her, but rather a quiet seriousness which he was bound to respect. He decided he would have to talk to her. She could tell him things, if she would.

Through an open doorway beneath a balcony which filled the rear of the building, Kent saw Paddy Trimm, the proprietor of the Beef Stew, sitting in a rocking chair, reading a magazine. He seemed to be entirely oblivious to the boisterous dancers who were shaking the floor and the sawing fiddles that made an ear-splitting noise under the over-hanging balcony, which acted as a sounding board. A pair of thick-lensed glasses contributed to his appearance of studious isolation.

Kent paused in the doorway. If the saloonman saw him, he gave no sign. Kent decided he must be reading something mighty interesting, and he noted the title of the magazine—"The Homemakers' Friend."

"Hey!" said Kent.

Slowly, Paddy Trimm lowered his magazine, pulled his glasses down on his nose, and peered at Kent. "Oh—come in!" he said cordially.

He took off his glasses, laid his magazine on the floor, and motioned Kent to another rocking chair which was padded with fancy cushions. Along one wall there was a couch draped with a silk covering and above it was a large picture of a vase filled with roses. Velvet curtains hung over an inner doorway.

Kent shook off the feeling that he was intruding upon the privacy of a simple old man who knew very little of the hard realities of life. "You own this joint?"

Paddy Trimm smiled, pleased. "Yes, I own the Beef Stew. It's changed a lot the last year or so—since the cattle boom. And I guess I haven't changed with it. I like it the way it used to be, quiet and friendly."

He rocked himself, shaking his head with gentle regret. It seemed a shame to disturb his pensive reflections.

"The man out front said I had to see you about cashin' in."

"Oh! Yes?" Paddy swept Kent with a quick, hard glance which did not fit the rest of the picture.

"He said he didn't have this much money."

"You've won quite a lot?"

Kent extended his hat. "And I lost some of 'em."

"Oh, you're bound to lose some." Again that naive, disarming smile. "You can't win all the time, you know."

"I mean I lost 'em when I upset the table."

"Oh, so you did." Paddy seemed to know all about it, though it had just happened and he couldn't have seen it. "And you kept George Kilgore from killing himself. It was a noble thing to do."

"No it wasn't. I thought he was

goin' to shoot me."

Paddy laughed quietly, as if he knew that too. "Well, you saved his life, anyway. Of course, you can't keep a man from killing himself if he is bound to do it, but Kilgore may not try it any more. He's a sensible man—only when he's gambling. It's a terrible vice, gambling."

"Is it?" Kent asked cynically. "Then why don't you stop it?"

"Me?" Paddy seemed horrified. "I don't gamble."

"But you run a gambling house, the only one in town so far as I could see."

"Of course. If I didn't, somebody else would. Some men are bound to gamble. I discourage them all I can. I tell them it will ruin them. I advised Kilgore to quit, and I warned him not to play when he came in tonight. It's the first time he has played in years—since his wife died. That was five, six years ago. I thought he was cured. I guess it was Frances that kept him straight. That's his daughter, Frances. A fine girl. She didn't want to leave, but Kilgore insisted that she go off to school. And now look what's happened!"

Kent was beginning to feel uncomfortable. "Yeh, too bad," he grunted. "How about cashin' in these chips?"

"Oh! Of course. Let's see, how many do you have—hm-m— You do have a lot, don't you? Well, stack them up on the table."

When Kent go them stacked in piles of twenties, they covered one end of the table. He felt for the bill of sale, just to make sure he had it.

"Umm-m! Eighty, a hundred, a hundred and twenty—" The saloonman took up a pencil and began to add up the totals. "You've got eight thousand, four hundred and fifty dollars. That's a lot of money, young man, a lot of money!"

"Don't I know it!"

"Did you ever have that much before?"

"Not by about eight thousand dollars."

"Umm-m-m. And you won it all gambling. You won it from George Kilgore, who tried to kill himself."

Kent protested, "Not all of it from him. I won from everybody in the game."

"You won his cattle too."

Kent's hand went to his pocket again. "Sure. It was all fair and square."

"Of course, of course. But it was gambling. It's something for nothing. And now you have over eight thousand dollars and five hundred head of cattle. A fortune! What are you going to do with it?"

"Why—I don't know." Kent hadn't thought much about that. "I haven't got it yet," he said pointedly.

THE other man arose, paddled softly across the floor and through the curtained doorway. Kent sat nervously waiting. He glanced out across the main floor and saw a familiar red head. Why did that girl keep watching him?

Farther on, at the end of the bar, leaned Skid. He was watching, too. Kent's uneasiness mounted.

"Here you are."

Paddy had returned to the room with the money. He began counting it out.

Kent had seen stacks of money in banks and on gambling tables that represented much more wealth, but he had never seen a stack which looked that big to him before. It was hard for him to realize it all belonged to him. In trying to surround such an immense idea, he encountered another, and a somewhat disturbing one.

Did this money belong to him? What had he done to earn it? Nothing at all. He had merely sat down at a table, picked up some pieces of paste-

board, laid some of them down, picked up some more, then laid them all down—and repeated this process over and over again. And here was all of this money. They said it was his. But it couldn't be. He had done nothing to earn it, no real work—

No work to sit there in the hell-hot pit, with the flames fairly licking around him? It was the hardest work he had ever done, harder even than milking cows, harder than milking a hundred cows!

"You know where I can find a cattle buyer?" he asked.

"You're going to sell Kilgore's cattle?"

"They're not Kilgore's cattle! They're mine!"

Paddy Trimm sat down and rocked himself gently. "You may have a hard time selling them."

"Why?" demanded Kent.

"I've seen it happen before. Fact is, I've had to take over some cattle myself like that. Men come in here to gamble. They lose—" He smiled guilelessly, and added, "sometimes." His eyes flashed on hard and bright for an instant. "They come to me with IOU's, they want to sell me their cattle, their homes—they'll sell their souls for a few more chips. They are desperate. Like Kilgore. Well, maybe not as bad as he was."

He sat, rocking back and forth. "I've seen a lot of men stirred up enough to kill somebody else, but not so bad off they wanted to kill themselves. I can't figure out how bad that is, can you?"

"No," Kent said shortly. "Ain't this bill of sale any good?"

Paddy looked at it without interest. "That all depends. If you'd *bought* cattle from him, he'd have given you the same thing. And you could have turned around and sold it. But winning it in a poker game—that's different. Folks around here think so, anyway."

"But I won 'em, fair and square! I risked my money against his cattle, and he lost. I figured they was as good as money. And they are! Hell, I'll find a buyer! Everybody wants to buy cattle."

"Yes. Everybody wants to buy cattle these days. They're crazy. They buy cattle without seeing them, and sell them to somebody else who never sees them. Just pieces of paper, like you've got there, they buy and sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. It's crazy!"

"And you say I can't sell this one? That's crazy, too."

"I don't say you can't sell it. I say you'll have some trouble selling it, for you didn't *buy* it."

"How's anybody goin' to know whether I bought it or not?"

Paddy smiled again. Kent found it a most irritating smile—complacent, secretive, lofty. "Folks find out about things like that."

Kent began stuffing the money in his pockets.

"And now I reckon wild horses couldn't drag you away from the gambling tables," said Paddy.

"I ain't goin' to play any more," said Kent firmly, and he really meant it.

Paddy was watching him with a peculiar, calculating look. "You're not going to play any more? You're very wise."

KENT wondered if he was being wise in admitting it. If this man was willing for him to walk out of the place with eight thousand dollars in his pocket, he would be a strange specimen of gambling house proprietor.

"With your luck, of course, there's no telling what you could do at the roulette table," said Paddy. He added quickly, "I'm glad you're quitting."

Kent grinned. "You ain't tryin' to talk me into droppin' my roll, are you?"

Paddy said piously, "My boy, I never encourage any one to gamble. It's a vicious habit. It will ruin you quicker than anything in the world."

"Yeh, I've heard you say that before. Well, I'll be goin'. Much obliged."

"Are you going to carry all of that money around with you?"

"Is there any banks open all night?"'

"No, but—you could leave it here in my safe."

It struck Kent as a sensible suggestion and he might have accepted it, although he didn't quite trust this queer old gent; but the red-headed girl bobbed up at that moment in the crowd of dancers which shuffled past the door. She took her head warningly, as if she knew what he was considering. She couldn't have known. Or could she? Everybody around here knew too damned much.

"I reckon I won't bother you," said Kent.

"Suit yourself of course. I only wanted to help you."

"Uh, huh. There'll be a lot of people wantin' to help me now, as long as I've got my pockets full of money. That red-readed gal out there, for instance. She looks like she wanted to help me. What's her name?"

"Candice."

"What?"

"Candice. Just like candy, only it ends up in ice. Queer name. Queer girl. She's not—exactly the kind I would pick to help me take care of eight thousand dollars."

"No? Then what do you have her workin' around here fore?"

Paddy folded his hands on his round stomach and rocked some more. "The girls who work here are the best I can get, you understand. They cause me more trouble than all the rest of my business put together. If I had my way, I wouldn't have any girls in the place. But the customers want 'em."

Kent said soberly, "I think you ought to give up this business. You're too good a man to be runnin' a joint like this."

Paddy's eyes were two gleaming points of light. Then he laughed. "You're joshin' me. Get along with you."

Kent moved slowly around the edge of the dance floor, watching the red-headed girl with the funny name. What was it? Candice. Like candy, but with ice in it.

As soon as the dance was over he made his way to her. "How about the next one with me?"

"Thought you didn't have any time for women?"

"Wild women, I said."

She rumpled her flaming hair. "You want to know something? They keep me in a cage, when I'm not on the floor."

"I don't doubt it, from what Paddy said."

She stopped her clowning, and really looked wild for a minute. "What did that little son-of-a-bee say about me?"

"Oh, nothin' about you, personal. He just said his girls caused him more trouble than all the rest of his business."

The music started and they danced slowly, looking at each other from arm's length.

"What did you mean when you give me that 'No' signal awhile ago?" Kent asked.

"Wasn't he tryin' to get you to leave your money in his safe?"

"How'd you know that?"

She brought her lips together in a cynical line. "I know a lot of things."

"You know who got my gun?"

She wasn't expecting this. Her eyes dodged his, then came back. "Yes."

"Who?"

They were barely moving now. She

was rigid. "You know what it means to me if I tell you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so." Her hand tightened on his. "I don't know why I said I knew. I'm slippin', in my old age. I ought to looked at you like this—" She opened her eyes in what was meant to be innocent wonder—"Did you lose your gun, Mister? No, I don't know anything about it."

SHE made a wry face. "See? I can't put it across any more. I ain't the innocent young thing, and when I try to be, I make a fool of myself."

"*You* didn't get my gun!"

"How do you know I didn't?"

"What for?"

"Wait a minute! You're gettin' ahead of me. No, I didn't get your gun. But I know who did. And I know that it ain't a healthy thing to talk about."

"You know why they took it?"

"Sure. Sh-h-h." They were moving near the end of the bar, where Skid was still coiled in reptilian repose.

"I think I get it," Kent muttered. "It was him."

Again her body grew taut. "*I* didn't say that."

"No. Of course you didn't." Nothing was clear yet, but he was learning things. What would Skid take his gun for? Orders from Paddy? "I was winnin'. They wanted to knock me off. But that was a mighty poor way to go about it."

"Was it? Look! There's a man standin' at the bar with his foot cocked up on the rail and his sixgun stickin' out. Suppose somebody lifts that gun."

"That's awful hard for me to suppose. Unless the man is drunk."

"All right, suppose he's drunk—or suppose he is sittin' at a table playin' poker. When a man gets into a hot poker game, he don't know what's goin' on around him. It ain't hard to lift his gun."

"All right. Suppose Skid, or somebody, lifts his gun. Then what?"

"Well, he'll miss it pretty soon. Even if he's drunk, or if he's playin' poker. Pretty soon, he'll miss his gun. What'll he do? He'll make a grab at his empty holster, just like a man who misses his pocket book begins grabbin' at the pocket he thought it was in. He'll do it every time."

"I still don't savvy—"

"Don't you? There is somebody standin' behind him, when he turns around and begins grabbin' at where his gun *was*—and where everybody who's watchin' thinks it still *is*, especially if it's night, and there's a crowd around. The crowd don't begin lookin' him over to see if he's got his gun. They are gettin' out of the way, when they see a man start grabbin'."

It was getting clear to Kent. "And the hombre standin' behind him, waitin' for him to do this, plugs him. No! That won't do, pluggin' a man that didn't have a gun."

"Who goin' to know he didn't have a gun? He's stretched out there on the floor. Does anybody rush up and begin lookin' him over to see where his gun is? You know they don't. They hang back, waitin' for somebody else to do something. A couple of bouncers show up, they're always first to get there when there's a fight, and they look him over. They pick him up and carry him out. His gun's layin' there on the floor, right where *they* put it."

Kent caught a glimpse of Paddy Trimm, rocking serenely, absorbed in the "Homemakers Friend."

"Does that old man know what's goin' on?"

Candice laughed harshly. "Does he know! That old man knows everything. I'll bet he knows what I'm tellin' you right now—" She caught her breath —"What *am* I tellin' you for?"

Seeing her fear, brought him closer to the danger he was in. He had over eight thousand dollars in cash. He had a piece of paper worth ten thousand dollars. Eighteen thousand dollars! There were lots of men who would kill him for that.

"But—the old man offered to keep the money for me," he muttered.

"Sure. And he meant *keep* it. Then all they'd have to do is bump you off. It's better for them to take the money and then bump you—there's no chance of somebody else getting you first."

Kent lifted his hand to brush off a drop of sweat that was tickling him, creeping down his cheek like a fly. His face was hot, but he was cold where he had sweated through the back of his shirt. This was fear, and it was a kind he had never felt before. It was the fear of losing eighteen thousand dollars.

UNTIL then he had no idea of what a horrible fear it was. This was greedy and gripping. He was heartily ashamed of it. Not because he was afraid, for he knew that any normal human being sometimes becomes afraid, and that it is nothing to be ashamed of. He was ashamed of this because it was not a natural thing, like the fear of death or injury, but a miserable man-made thing that gets in a man's blood and rots out his heart.

"They'll kill me!" the girl breathed. "They ought to kill me. I'm a blabberin' fool. I know better than to go shootin' off my mouth. What did I I do it for?"

She was talking to herself, not looking at him, and he could not answer her. Women were always doing unaccountable things like this, and why she had done it was of no importance now.

"How are they goin' to know what you told me?" he asked, a little impatiently.

Kent remembered how Paddy Trimm had seemed to know all about the misunderstanding which resulted in his encounter with Kilgore. "They know I've got Kilgore's gun, anyway," he said grimly. "Maybe they know it won't be easy to get this one away from me."

"They won't try that again."

"What'll they do?"

"They'll just kill you, that's all."

He could smile a little at that. Other men had tried to kill him, but for other reasons, and that thought alone didn't frighten him. "Is that all?"

"No, that's not all! If it was, my knees wouldn't be rattlin' like the dice in a chuck-a-luck box." She tried to make a joke of it, but her face drained white again. "Skid's watchin' us! He knows! Don't look at him! He'll know what we're talkin' about. Oh, Lord! He'll know anyway!"

Kent took a deliberate look at the man. In spite of Skid's sinister serpentine appearance, he didn't appear to be very dangerous—no more than any other snake.

"Maybe I'd better have a talk with him," Kent mused.

"You mean—start a fight with him?"

It wasn't a bad idea. In fact, it was a pretty good idea. This sidewinder had taken his gun, had planned to kill him—was still planning to, if the girl knew what she was talking about. And Kent was willing to swear that she did.

"If he wants to kill me, I'll give him his chance right now," he said.

"Wait! That won't do you any good—even if you kill him. You can't kill 'em all. There's too many of 'em."

"Where are they? Who are they?"

"They're everywhere. I don't know who they all are—except the bouncers and the housemen. Nobody knows, but Paddy. Here comes one of 'em now—Trotter Bates!"

Trotter Bates came in from the street, flinging back both swinging doors, striding straight for the bar as if

there was nobody else in the place. His huge head oscillated slightly as he walked, bull-like, and the low rumble of his voice could be heard above the racket as he spoke to the bartender.

"You might have to fight *him*," Candice whispered, "if you tried to get Skid."

"Can I count on that?" Kent asked dryly. His primary concern was getting out of the place with his winnings, and he had no intention of starting a fight just for the fun of it. But he could see where there might be a lot of satisfaction in it, if Trotter Bates took a hand. Purely in the interest of good sportsmanship, Kent thought he would like to beat the head off of Trotter Bates.

"Whatever you do, don't start anything with *him!*" Candice warned.

It was a diabolical temptation, not only the way she said it, but the way everybody else had so obviously taken this advice. Kent's irritation returned as he thought of the way Trotter Bates had badgered the old man in the poker game, and had shot him to death for no other reason than because he was winning.

And not a soul had interfered. Not even Kent Keith.

Didn't the dead man have any friends? Didn't the town of Arapahoe have any citizens who believed in common decency, or law? Did they have any Law?"

He intended to ask Candice some of these questions, but his attention was drawn to a lanky, grim-looking cowhand who had suddenly stopped nearby and was staring into the office of Paddy Trimm. Now, he was approaching the saloonman. Paddy glanced over his magazine placidly, then looked worried and lowered the book with some sign of agitation. After a few words, the cowhand turned and walked up to Trotter Bates at the bar.

CANDICE was watching too. "Oh, the fool!" she murmured.

"What's goin' on?" Kent asked.

"It's Jim Sunberry. He worked for Fogle. He's just found out about the killin', I guess. What's he goin' to do? He hasn't even got a gun—"

Trotter Bates was turning slowly to face the cowhand. They were talking. Trotter's rumble could be heard, but not the voice of the other man. And then Trotter lashed out with his gun, hitting the cowhand over the head.

Jim Sunberry tried to fight back. He hammered at the big gunman with his fists and got in a few blows.

"Now's your chance!" whispered Candice. The fight had attracted the attention of everybody, including Skid. "Get out of here quick!" She was pulling Kent back under the balcony.

And again it was her quick thinking and common sense that kept Kent out of a fight in which he had no business. He really wanted to get in this one, and for a moment he had forgotten that he had eighteen thousand dollars in his pockets!

He was amazed and disgusted with himself. How could he forget a thing like that? How could a little flash of fury blind him to the danger of his own position and the necessity for getting out of this place with his winnings?

Keeping an eye on Skid, he backed into the shadows of the balcony, following the girl. The musicians were still sawing away on their fiddles, but more interested in the fight than in harmony, and their screeching discords filled the alcove at the rear of the bandstand, pounding Kent's ears with a wild and distracting clamor.

Candice drew him into a hallway. "You can get out the back—wait! Paddy's comin' that way!" She pushed open a door and they were in a dark room.

They stood motionless while footsteps padded softly along the hallway

and passed their door. Candice took a quick look down the hall. "Now you can go—" She twisted to look at him—"but where?"

He felt queerly at a loss, being thrown back on his own resources so abruptly. For the first time in his life that he could remember, he had been completely under another's domination, letting someone else think for him.

"I reckon I'll make out all right," he said shortly. And then he had to correct the implication of not being grateful to her. "I—I'm obliged to you, of course—" He thought of the danger she was in, also. "What are *you* goin' to do?"

"Nothin'. Why?"

"Suppose they find out you helped me get away—"

"You haven't got away yet! You better get out of here while the gettin's good.'"

HE KNEW it was the thing to do, but his conscience was troubling him again. All of this fuss, all of this danger she had brought on herself, just so he could get away with the money he'd won.

"Wha'd you do it for anyhow?" he asked.

"Will you get out of here?" she whispered frantically. "Stop starin' at me like that, and get out! I don't know why I done it. I just started poppin' off, that's all. I talked myself into a spot. But the quicker you get out of here, the better off I'll be. If they find you here—"

The sound of quick, heavy footsteps came from the hallway and Candice shrank away from the half-closed door. She stood touching Kent, and he could hear her subdued breathing and feel the trembling of her body. He put his arm around her to draw her away from the door, but she remained rigidly in front of him.

The door swung back and smashed into her; she didn't make a sound. Skid stood in the doorway, peering into the darkened room.

"Candice!" he snarled. "Where's that tinhorn at?"

He could apparently see her, but not Kent. She gave Kent a shove backward, then stepped up facing Skid. "What tinhorn?" she asked, and her voice was calm.

"You let him get away! You helped him! I'll wring your damn neck!"

"Not easy, you won't! Stay out of my room! I've told you before—Paddy's told you—stay out—!"

"Where'd he go?"

Skid advanced on her threateningly. She tried to get by him, out into the hallway, but he seized her.

Kent stepped out with his gun swinging. He cracked Skid squarely between the eyes, and as the fellow weaved dazedly Kent hit him again on top of the head.

It was enough to brain any ordinary man, but there was a writhing, snakelike recoil to Skid which seemed to absorb some of the killing force of the blows. He didn't fall; he just coiled up at Kent's feet. He continued to writhe and to make a rattling noise in his throat.

"No—don't—shoot—" he rattled.

Kent had no intention of shooting him, but discovered that his gun was aimed suggestively. No feeling of mercy kept him from doing it.

"Why not?" he muttered.

"It'll make too much noise," said Candice. "They'll be after you, now, before you can get vary far."

Maybe that was it. Everything she said made sense, but a senseless stubbornness was coming over him. He didn't want to run away and let her face the consequences of all this alone.

"I reckon I'm not goin' anywhere," he said, "unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you want to clear out too."

"Where would I go?"

"I don't know. I don't know where I'm goin', either."

She looked at him in startled earnestness, and he had the feeling that he was seeing her for the first time. He saw a feminine softness beneath the hard cynicism. He saw her gratitude, and it gave him a pleasant glow.

At the same time he saw that he had stuck his neck out. What was he proposing to do? Take this girl with him? Where?

"There's a train due in about twenty minutes!" There was a desperate eagerness in her words. "We might—I might make it— You could go, too, of course—"

Kent was very much afraid he was getting himself into a worse jam than he was in. If he ran away with this girl, he would be responsible for her. He would have to take care of her and, in the end, she might take care of him. She had shown a remarkable faculty for doing so.

If she had been a helpless young thing in danger, he would have broken his neck to help her. But she was neither helpless nor young. She was a strong character, and Kent had an uncomfortable feeling that she had steered him all too adroitly into the present situation.

"Where does the train go to?" he asked.

"El Paso. But," she added hastily, "we—you don't have to go to El Paso. You can get off wherever you want to."

She was giving him a loophole, and he was jumping for it. "Yeah! I could get off and come back here and you could go on—"

"What do you want to come back here for?"

"I've got five hundred head of cattle to sell!"

"Oh—well, let's get out of here."

Kent turned—and faced Paddy Trimm. The saloonman was standing in the hallway, and had obviously heard everything they said.

"You're leaving?" he asked genially. His cold, sharp eyes flashed at Candice. "You're not waiting for your pay?"

Candice backed into Kent, and presently he realized he had his arm around her again.

"Oh, well," Paddy went on, with a shrug, "what's a few dollars between friends? And your friend has plenty of money."

Kent wondered if Paddy was insulting the girl, and, if so, what he should do about it. Could the fact that he had eight thousand dollars in cash have anything to do with the girl's fear of remaining here?

"What happened to you?" Paddy asked, looking down at Skid as though he had just seen him.

"The same thing that'll happen to you—or anybody else you send after us!" cried Candice.

Paddy looked pained. "Why, I won't send anybody after you. If you want to leave you are free to go. In fact, I won't shed no tears." He looked at Kent quizzically. "No, I won't shed no tears."

He smiled, waved his hand pleasantly, and walked away. Kent's mind was a confused swirl of conflicting impressions. Paddy seemed so harmless. Candice seemed so hard and scheming. He had only her word that Paddy was a crook—

SKID was crawling away. Kent reached down and grabbed him by the neck, jerked him to a standing position. "You was mighty damned anxious to find me a little while ago. Well, here I am. What do you want?"

"I—nothin'—I don't want nothin'—"

"You're goin' to get somethin'!" Kent took hold of his gun. "That smack I give you was just a love lick, just a love lick, my friend. I've got some questions, and you'd better have some answers. You see this gun?"

Skid cowered.

"It ain't my gun. You know that, don't you?"

Skid was squirming and weaving.

"Who got my gun?" Kent demanded.

"I—I—"

From the distance, there came the low, moaning whistle of a train.

"Tell me quick, and straight! If you lie to me I'll smash your head in!"

Skid threw a poisonous glance at Candice. "She told you I done it, didn't she?"

"Never mind what she told me! *You're* talkin' now."

Skid yelped, *"She's* the one that done it!"

Candice screeched, "You liar! You liar! You liar!"

Again the train whistled, nearer now, more demanding. Candice put an imploring hand on Kent's arm. "We've got to go. We've got to get out of here!"

"Have we?"

"Please! Please!" There was genuine terror in her words. Kent found it impossible to resist. He gave Skid a shove, sending him back against the wall. Candice was tugging at his sleeve. He followed her down the hallway, through an outside door into the night.

"We've got to hurry!" She guided him down an alley, and he stumbled till his eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

"Run!" she cried. "If we miss that train— Oh, we *can't* miss it—!"

Kent ran, dragging along his uncertainties and his doubts. He was inclined to believe the girl—why else would Skid have been after him? But he felt that he had been forced into a hasty and unwise retreat.

Still, there was no reason why he should remain at the Beef Stew, and there were plenty of reasons why he should get out of there. Eighteen thousand of them.

He reassured himself that the money was still safe, and ran a little faster.

The depot stood at the end of the main street, revealed now by the light of the locomotive. The train rolled across the intersection and came to a stop, blocking the darkened little street. Kent and Candice raced down a cinder path to the wooden platform.

The train began to move. Candice cried, "Wait! Wait!" Her cry was lost in the angry "chug-chug-chug" of the engine as its wheels sought get-away traction.

Candice gave a final sprint which left Kent stretching his legs behind her. As the girl reached the rear platform of the last coach, an object loomed in front of Kent. He crashed into it and went sprawling. When he got to his feet, he saw Candice standing on the lower step of the receding car. She was clinging to the hand rail, looking back at him in dismay.

He thought she was going to jump off, although the train was moving along at a fast clip, and he held his breath, waiting apprehensively. That instant of waiting put him hopelessly out of the race. And Candice didn't jump.

As the distance widened swiftly between them, Kent felt an unaccountable relief. Once more he was alone. He liked it much better that way—especially when he was in danger.

"You clumpsy goop!"

Had he thought he was alone? He began to take notice of the object with which he had collided. It was animate and articulate.

It went on indignantly, "Can't you see where you're going?"

"I thought I could," he said. "But I reckon I'm not goin' anywhere, now."

The indignant object assumed female form. With the passing of the train, the only light on the platform came from the bow-window of the station several yards away.

"Just look what you did!" said the female. She indicated a dilapidated object which proved to be a smashed valise with the contents scattered over the platform.

"I'm awful sorry, ma'am. I was runnin' for the train and I didn't see you—was you tryin' to catch it too?"

"I just got off. I thought I'd stepped into a stampede. I got out of the way of the first animal, but I couldn't dodge you."

WHEN he tried to help her, she waved him aside. "You've done enough damage. Just stay out of the way."

He stood and watched her gather up her belongings. She tried to fasten the valise and swore a soft "Damn!" He didn't offer his assistance till she looked up again.

"Want me to try it?" he asked.

The catch on the valise was broken. There was another handbag, overturned, but still intact.

"Where you headed for?" he asked, knowing that he should help her with her bags, but knowing too that he should stay out of sight.

"Oh— I don't know!"

He waited. "You a stranger here?"

"No, no. I don't know whether I'll stay in town tonight or go home. I guess I ought to go home."

Kent tucked the broken valise under one arm and picked up the other one, resignedly. There was nobody else there to help her. He was stuck with another woman. However, he was sure this one wouldn't be so much trouble to get rid of.

"Where do you live?"

"Ten miles south."

There is a limit to any man's gallantry, and it seldom extends ten miles. "How do you figure on gettin' out there?"

"I'll get a rig at the livery stable, of course."

He had left his horse at the livery stable, and he knew they would have to go back down the main street to get there. Had he not been encumbered with this woman, he could have gone a round-about way, got his horse, and slipped out of town.

"Haven't you got any folks?" he asked irritably. "Why didn't they meet you?"

"They didn't know I was coming back," she said sharply. "And what business is it of yours?"

He felt like dropping her bags and walking off. She was a cantankerous old blister, but still she was a woman, alone and afoot, and it was midnight. "I'll take you to the livery stable," he said, thinking that might be a good place for her—in a box stall, where she couldn't bite or kick anybody.

"You don't need to trouble yourself!" she said sharply, moving up beside him, and reaching for the bags.

She was in the light now and he got his first look at her. It gave him a pleasurable shock. She was young and, in spite of her rumpled and frowning appearance, decidedly good looking.

"Well, what are you staring at me for?" she asked.

He couldn't see how that harsh, critical voice could come from those softly rounded lips.

"I didn't know you was—was—"

"Was what?"

"—that you looked like that. You sounded pretty tough."

She began to laugh. "Was I that bad? I'm sorry. I know you didn't run

into me on purpose. And you're the one that should be mad, I guess. You missed your train."

It was not the same voice. It was not the same person, at all. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I missed my train!"

"And you're not mad?"

"Are you?"

"No."

"Then what have I got to be mad about?"

He was not accustomed to running for trains, and he didn't remember ever having missed one before. He had lived for twenty-four years without knowing the thrill of it. He promised himself that he would run for trains often, and miss them.

"But you were with someone," she reminded him. "She caught the train and—you didn't."

"So she did," he mused. "So I didn't. It must have been fate. You've sure got a lot of it around here."

"A lot of what?"

"Fate. Luck. Whatever you want to call it. This town is full of it."

SHE said inquiringly, "You've been lucky here?"

"I've been rollin' in luck ever since I hit this town," he assured her.

"How long have you been here?"

"About eight hours."

"My goodness! And you're leaving so soon?"

"That wasn't my idea. It was—well, when I bumped into you, that was just another stroke of luck."

She had a shy smile that she used to advantage, letting it tug at her full red lips without changing the contour of them very much. "It was quite a stroke, all right. I think you broke one of my ribs. And I think I'd better take my handbags."

Kent would have carried the bags the full ten miles, rather than give them up now. He walked on with her and told her again how sorry he was he had busted into her; but he had never known such cheerful sorrow.

"Don't you think you ought to stay in town tonight?" he asked anxiously. "Maybe you ought to get a Doc to look you over."

She ridiculed the idea. "I've been thrown from horses and fallen from hay wagons and run over by a team of mules. You don't think a little bump like that is going to hurt me, do you?"

They turned into the main street. Only two buildings were alight—the Beef stew with a bright beckoning glow, and the hotel with a dim and weary gleam, as if it were waiting for the revelry to cease.

"This town has changed a lot," said the girl.

"You been gone long?"

She laughed. "About eight hours."

He marvelled at this, and his spirits soared. Lady Luck was surely with him tonight. "Quite a trip you had," he bantered, and she laughed again, as if he had said something quite clever.

"It's the first time I'd been on the train in years," she said. "I guess I got scared. So I just got off and caught the next train back."

"Where'd you start?"

"Dad was trying to send me off to school, but I'm just not the intellectual type. I'd lots rather stay home."

They walked on in silence down the darkened street, their footsteps echoing loudly on the board walk. As they approached the Beef Stew, Kent began to lose the queer feeling of surprise and elation which had hit him with his first look at the girl.

And now he emerged from the half-conscious glow of wonder, which, along with the darkness, had blotted out harsh realities. The light from the Beef Stew did away with all of that. It was harsh enough and real enough. It made an ugly gash in the night.

"The Beef Stew seems to be going full blast," she observed.

"It's quite a joint," he agreed. "You know anything about the old boy who runs it?"

"Paddy Trimm? Yes, I know him."

"You do?" he encouraged.

"I know everybody who lives here." That's all she would say, but he got the impression that Paddy Trimm was not one of her favorite citizens.

Kent's eyes were on the light ahead when he felt a movement behind him, and then a gun in his back. "Missed the train, huh?" The voice was a chortling bellow which seemed to have shaken the sidewalk instead of the noiseless step. "You ought to have run a little faster."

Kent held the broken valise under his left arm, and carried the other one with his left hand, so that his right hand was free. But the girl was on his right. If she would only move out of his way. But she was standing still, very close.

"What do you want?" Kent muttered.

"I want eight thousand, four hundred and fifty dollars. You happen to have it on you?"

KENT turned his head slowly for a look at the man, but could see only the outline of his figure. The huge neck and shoulders and the bull-like voice made identification easy. It was Trotter Bates.

"What makes you think I've got that much money?" Kent asked, giving the girl time to get clear. She was now moving away.

"Where you goin', sister?" Trotter rumbled.

"I—you—don't want me, do you?" she said.

"You're damn right I want you! Paddy wants you. What'd you try to run away for?"

"Run away? Paddy? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, you little snitch. But that ain't in my line. Paddy'll take care of you."

"You mean Paddy Trimm?"

"Hey! What are you givin' me, anyhow?"

She was silent a moment. "Who do you think I am, Trotter?"

He moved closer, to stare into her face, but he kept the gun pressed into Kent's back.

"Frances!" he said.

"Uh, huh," she murmured, serenely.

"You—you come back!" he said.

"Yes."

"What for? What are you doin' with this tinhorn?"

"I just got off the train. He was trying to get on. We—sort of got in each other's way."

Trotter moved his head in a stunned manner. "I thought you was Candice."

Kent knew that he would have to take advantage of Trotter's surprise before it wore off. He twisted away from the boring gun. It roared and spat a streak of fire at him, but his back was just outside that sretak. He lost no time in trying to get hold of his own gun, but went right on with the blow which was part of his sidewise movement. It caught Trotter in the side. The man was so big, it was like hitting the side of a sow. It was impossible to knock him down.

Kent saw he had to use his gun, and he drew it as he struck with his left hand. The two body blows jarred Trotter enough to destroy the effectiveness of his second shot.

By that time Kent was chopping out with his sixgun, landing a beautiful stroke to the other man's head. It was better than trying to shoot him, in that close-up struggle. It was more effective too than a bullet in any but a vital spot, for it had the added force to

send him crashing backward, giving Kent some elbow room.

Kent used that elbow room to good advantage. He did what he had been wanting to do since he first laid eyes on the man. He beat the hell out of him. Or at least he beat the fight out of him, and the consciousness. Maybe the hell was still there. He was still alive and, Kent reflected, as long as he lived there would probably be hell in him. It wouldn't be very hot, though —not for some time.

"You've—killed him!" cried the girl.

"Have I?" Kent inspected his foe with a practised eye. "To bad—but I didn't."

"Why, you coldblooded—"

"Now, wait a minute! You saw him try to stick me up, didn't you?"

"Trotter Bates is no stickup man!"

Kent was astonished. "Don't you believe your own eyes? Didn't you see him put a gun on me?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, if that ain't a stickup, what is it?"

"I don't know whot it is! I don't know what it's all about. Maybe you robbed him, first!"

She bent over him, touching his battered head, and then sprang up and ran toward the saloon. She hesitated before the swinging doors for an instant, then pushed through them.

Kent was filled with the bitterness of the unjustly accused. She hadn't given him time to explain, she had taken sides against him and jumped to an illogicial and entirely unfair conclusion. He started after her. She had to listen to him. She had to believe him!

The doors of the saloon swung open and a bunch of men came out, with the girl and Paddy Trimm in the lead. Kent still had time to slip away in the darkness, but he didn't feel like running any more. He felt like standing right where he was, and he did. Right in the middle of the walk.

THEY surged up to him and stopped. Their surprise and uncertainty gave him an opening advantage. "You told him to come and get me, didn't you?" he said to Paddy, and before the saloonman had an answer, Kent went on, "Who's goin' to be next?"

"I—don't know what you're talkin' about," said Paddy.

"I been told that you know everything. I'm beginnin' to wonder. If you're just half as smart as they say you are, you're goin' to let me alone."

"My fine young friend, I have had nothing whatever to do with this. If Trotter tried to rob you, that was his own idea."

Kent was half-inclined to believe him. In any event Paddy Trimm was too smooth a customer to have him shot and robbed before the eyes of the girl.

Her accusation still irked him. "Will you tell her that I didn't rob him?"

Paddy looked puzzled. "I don't know what happened." He glanced at the girl. "Do you?"

"Well, Trotter came up and put a gun on this man, said to give him eight thousand, four hundred and fifty dollars. This man said it was a stick-up, but it didn't sound like that to me. How did he know this man had that much money, and where did it come from?"

"Hm-m-m," said Paddy.

"You tell her where it come from," Kent insisted.

Paddy hesitated. "You're sure you want me to?"

"Hell, yes! You know I won it in a poker game! What's wrong about that?"

Paddy's voice took on a pious purr. "Gambling, my boy, is a vicious pastime. I don't approve of it, at all."

Kent snorted. "That don't answer

my question. I want her to get this straight. I got this money playin' poker. I didn't cheat nobody, I didn't rob nobody. But ever since I got this money, I've been followed around—by your thugs."

Paddy lifted his hands in a gesture of weariness. "I had nothing at all to do with it, I tell you—"

"And I can tell you," interposed the girl, "That Trotter Bates isn't one of Paddy's 'thugs'. He is a neighbor and a friend of mine."

Kent shook his head, a little groggy now. "You got some fine neighbors and friends," he muttered.

They moved past him, and Paddy clicked his tongue in sympathy as he examined Trotter. "My, my! Tsk, tsk, tsk! This is awful! Take him inside, boys."

Trotter was quite a load. Four men lugged him into the saloon, but the girl did not follow.

"And now, my dear," said Paddy unctuously, "what are you doing back in town?"

"Oh, I couldn't go! I just couldn't. I—I'm all mixed up. I'm going home."

"Oh! Tonight?"

"Yes, yes. Right now—where are my bags? Oh, look at them—my things scattered all over the street—!" She began dolefully gathering up her possessions again.

Kent was miserable. He wanted to help her, but as she picked articles of clothing out of the street and shook the dirt from them, she gave every indication of not wanting any help from him.

"I think you ought to stay in town tonight, Frances," Paddy went on uneasily. "You'll feel so much better tomorrow, and—"

"I feel all right! I'm going home!"

"Very well. I'll get you a rig."

"Thanks. Just get me a horse."

"But your grips—your dress you got on—"

"I'll go to the hotel and change. I'll tie my grips on the saddle. I want to *ride!*"

Kent wanted to ride too. "I'll go along with you," he said.

"That won't be necessary, Mister—"

"Call me Kent."

"Mister Kent."

"That's the first name. And yours is Frances, ain't it?"

"Really, I'd rather go alone."

"Well, in that case let me get you a horse."

"Oh—all right."

At the livery stable, Kent roused a sleepy boy and hired a horse, then saddled his own mount. He rode the hired horse and led his back to the hotel. Paddy and the girl were waiting at the door.

"I brought two so you could have your pick," Kent explained.

SHE gave him a frosty look. "If you get too persistent, I'll stay here," she said.

"If I just knowed what that meant," I wouldn't do it. Now, which horse do you want?"

"It makes no difference. Just so you understand that I'd rather be alone."

"I'd be awful dumb if I didn't understand that. Now, I'll tie your bags on—they're goin' to bounce around a little—"

He fastened them on the back and handed her the reins. "Thanks," she said, and swung into the saddle.

Kent let her get started, and then galloped after her. "I'll came after the horse tomorrow," he said.

"Never mind. I'll bring him back."

"When?"

'What difference does that make to you?"

'Well, you see, he's my horse, and—"

She reined up. "Your horse! I declare, Mr. Kent, you're the most—

aggravating man I ever saw. Here take this horse."

"Oh, no. We'd have to take the grips off and tie 'em on here, and there's no use of that. You can take the horse and keep him as long as you want to. I don't need him. I just wanted to know when you was comin' back so I'd know when I'd be seein' you again."

She said distractedly, "Look. I don't know you. I don't know anything about you. It's a long ride home. It's night. Put yourself in my place, now. If you were me, would you want a strange man tagging along after you?"

He grinned into the darkness. "There's been some strange men taggin' around after me, and I didn't like it very much. But we can fix that. There's no need of me bein' a stranger. I can tell you all about myself, while we ride along. My name is Kent Keith —I told you that, didn't I?—and I'm twenty-four years old, and I came from Oklahoma. My folks are farmers, and I used to have to milk the cows. Did you ever milk a cow?"

"No."

"Well, it's the dog-gondest job you ever got into. You've got to do it twice a day, mornin' and night, every day in the year. Think about it! You got to be in that cow lot, settin' on that stool with a bucket between your legs, at six o'clock every mornin' and six o'clock every night. You get so you ain't any better than a cow, yourself."

"It must be very monotonous. You'll have to tell me all about it sometime. Goodbye." She started on.

"I'd just as soon tell you right now. Well, I stayed with it till I was eighteen years old. I might of still be there, if it hadn't been for Isobel."

He waited and she said with an air of resignation, "All right. You might as well tell me about Isobel."

"Isobel got milk fever and died. It was just after she'd come fresh and we had Bessie dried up. Well, it was pretty sad. It was the first time we'd been without a cow to milk since I was twelve years old. I didn't know hardly what to do with myself. Come six o'clock in the mornin' and six o'clock at night, I'd go out to the cow lot and just set there."

"But I thought you hated to milk so bad."

"I did. But when you do any thing twice a day for six years, you get so used to it you don't know what to do with yourself if something throws you off the track. I was glad, and I was sad. I'd have probably gone loco if I hadn't got out of there."

"You are very amusing, Mr. Kent, but not convincing. I don't believe you ever milked a cow."

"I'll prove it to you, when we get to your ranch."

"We don't have any milk cows. We buy our milk in cans."

"You're smart. I think I'm goin' to like it at your ranch."

"Oh, do you? How nice! I see you believe in making yourself right at home."

On the contrary, he didn't. He had always been very careful not to impose upon anybody's hospitality, and never before had he pushed in where he wasn't wanted. But a radical change had come over him this night.

With what amounted to eighteen thousand dollars in his pocket, he felt that he owned the world. He had acquired the power of wealth, and he had demonstrated twice his power to hang onto it.

On top of that, he had met a girl that gave him an added feeling of elation. He had never chased after girls very much. He had known many girls in his wanderings and had liked some of them, but had never exerted himself to win the favors of any. It hadn't been necessary. He treated them all

with respect, and they seemed to like it. He gave them credit for being intelligent human beings who had a right to their own lives, and a share in the lives of men. He had older sisters at home, and he always suspected that they were smarter than he was, had a better time, and had more friends.

THIS had been his attitude in general, and had applied to all women. But here was a special case. This girl was out of the ordinary in that she didn't give him any encouragement, but instead needled him constantly. And he liked it.

"Now that you've told me about Isobel and Bessie, what about Candice?"

He laughed. "You're gettin' mixed up. Isobel and Bessie were cows. Candice is the girl that I—that caught the train."

"Yes, I know."

He believed her curiosity was a good sign. "She's just a girl that works at the Beef Stew. She tipped me off that Paddy Trimm and his thugs would try to rob me, and—well, we were gettin' out of there."

"Were they goin' to rob her, too?" she asked, with that little touch of skepticism and irony which had been in all of her questions.

He knew what she was thinking, and he resented it strongly—so strongly because the same idea troubled him. Had Candice played up the danger she was in, to get him to run off with her? She knew he had made a big winning. She knew how to separate suckers from their winnings.

If that had been her plan, it hadn't worked. Fate, in a very pleasant form, had interfered. And now he was rid of Candice and didn't want to think about her.

"She was afraid to stay there, after tippin' me off. She told me a lot of things about Paddy and this Trotter What's-his-name."

"What did she tell you about Trotter?"

"She said he was a killer that worked for Paddy."

"That's ridiculous! He's a rancher. I know him *very well.*"

He didn't like the way she said it, and he didn't believe it. "You don't mean that you and that bellerin' bull are—friends!"

"'Friends' is not exactly the word. I may marry him."

If she had only hit over the head with a six-gun! If she had just shot him through the stomach? He wouldn't have been so dizzy, he wouldn't have felt so sick.

"You're givin' me a fancy ride," he said. "All right. Have your joke. But it ain't funny."

"It isn't intended to be funny. I'm quite serious. He has asked me to marry him."

For a long time he could say nothing. Each time the words formed in his mind, they exploded. "I haven't had a good look at you," he mumbled, at last. "Just there in the lamplight a few times, but if I ain't blind, if I ain't crazy—you're a nice lookin' girl. You're about twenty years old. You wouldn't have any trouble gettin' married."

"Thanks," she said, serenely.

"Didn't anybody ever ask you to marry 'em—except him?"

"Well, now, let me see. No-o, not that I remember."

"Are you awful anxious to get married?"

"Not particularly."

He shook his head. "I give up. I don't understand it." He reined closer to try to see her face. "You don't care anything about him, or you wouldn't have left him back there, the shape he was in. He may be dyin' right now!"

"Trotter is hard to kill," she said

coolly. "He's been in a good many fights, and he hates to have anybody make a fuss over him. I'm sure he'll be all right, and—my advice to you is, don't miss the next train."

He was beginning to wonder if that wasn't good advice. But he had to stay here till he sold the cattle.

"I suppose you won that money from Trotter in a poker game, and he thought you cheated him," she said.

"I wasn't in the same game with him."

"Then why would he try to take that money away from you?"

He had already answered that, and it seemed to him that Trotter's own words and actions convicted him. Se he said nothing.

"I don't believe it!" she cried. "Trotter is not a stick-up man!"

Kent let her talk. She would have to convince herself of the truth.

"He's not an angel—far from it. He drinks and he fights and he gambles. I don't mind his drinking and his fighting so much, if he just wouldn't gamle! It will ruin him! Why do men gamble?"

"It's pretty hard to say—"

"You're a gambler, aren't you?"

"No."

"Then what are you? How did you win eight thousand dollars?"

"Luck was just running my way tonight."

"And tomorrow night it will be running the other way, and you'll lose everything you have. I know all about it! My father used to gamble. It ruined him, he almost lost his mind, and it killed my mother!

"That's the reason I won't go off to school and leave my father alone. He might start gambling again. And I know what it does to him—"

SHE paused. "Excuse me. I lose my head when I get started on that subject. I didn't mean to—show you the family skeletons."

It was a skeleton that Kent was seeing—a grinning, rattling, horrible thing.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Frances Kilgore. Why?

The skeleton danced. It waved its arms. It leered.

"Kilgore," he said. "Kilgore."

"Yes. What's so strang about that?"

Was it so strange? No, it was quite familiar. Kilgore was the man who had tried to kill himself. It was Kilgore's cattle that now belonged to Kent. And this was his daughter.

It was obvious that she knew nothing about all of this. He was equally certain that she would soon find out about it, but Kent couldn't bring himself to tell her now.

"What are you so quiet about?" she persisted.

"I'm just thinkin'. I—reckon you're right about gamblin'. It's bad business."

"I thought you had been quite lucky."

"I have—in a way. I won some money tonight. I won some—cattle."

"Then why do you suddenly decide gambling is bad business?"

He tried to think up some answer—anything except the right one. "It's like you say, you win and then you lose—everything."

What had he lost? Not a thing. And yet a vast sense of loss filled him. It was like calling a very big bet, and seeing the other cards come down. A straight flush, against his aces up.

The girl had shown her hand, and now it was up to him to show his. Or just toss his cards away.

Could he do that? Could he toss five hundred cattle into the discard? Hell, no! And why should he? The cattle were his! He had won them, fair air square.

"How did you happen to win cattle in a poker game?"

"The other man run out of money."

"And lost his cattle. What a shame! For him, of course." She added caustically, "Lucky for you, of course."

Then she laughed. "I was just thinking how funny it was—you winning cattle, and hating them so."

"Yeh. Yeh, it's sure funny."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"Sell 'em."

"How many did you win?"

"Five hundred head."

"Five hundred!" she gasped. "You won five hundred head of cattle in a poker game? Why that's terrible! For the loser, of course. Who did you win them from?"

He couldn't ignore her point blank question, and there was no use to lie to her. But he couldn't speak. His voice wouldn't work.

"Who did you win them from?" she repeated, and there was an awful silence.

"Tell me!" He could feel her sudden panic. "Was it—was it—?"

"Kilgore," he forced the word out of his throat, and it nearly gagged him.

"My father!"

He had seen it coming, and he knew it would be pretty bad, but he didn't know it would hurt like this. He wasn't easily hurt. He was tough. He was able to stand up and take it when he had to, and he could give it right back.

But not this. He took it lying down, and he didn't try to get up. "I didn't know he was your old man," he muttered and then he realized how asinine that was; at the time of the poker game, he didn't know anything about her.

"That's why Trotter was after you!" she said.

"Was it?" he pondered dully upon this idea.

"You cheated my father, and Trotter was after you!"

"I didn't cheat nobody!"

"You—you tinhorn!" She lashed at the horse, and bounded away. He kept along behind her, in miserable indecision. What should he do? Give the cattle back to them? But why? Give give ten thousand dollars away, just because this girl came along? What a damn-fool thing to think about!

THEY pounded through the night, across the wide flat and up a long slope, over some rocky hills, through a sprinkling of pine trees, then down into a valley. She didn't speak, and neither did he.

He wondered if she would think any better of him when she learned that he had prevented her father from killing himself. She ought to thank him for that, at least.

And yet, what difference did it make wheather she thanked him or not? She would still hate him. She would hold him guilty of "ruining" her father.

And suppose the old man had gone off and killed himself, after all!

The sky was taking on the reflection of dawn when they came to the ranch. It was time for ranchers to be up, for breakfast to be in preparation. But there was no sign of life about the place.

Frances slipped the saddle from her sweating horse and turned it into a feed lot. Still ignoring Kent, she started for the house. He didn't want her to go in alone; he was afraid of what she might discover. So he walked along behind her.

At the door, she swung about. "I couldn't keep you from following me home, but now if you know what's good for you, you'll clear out."

"I won't bother you any more," he said. "All I want is—a cup of coffee."

"You've got a lot of gall!"

"Yeh. But no coffee. I'll fix it—and it'll do you good, too."

She tried to slam the door in his face,

but he pushed in beside her.

"I'll tell my father—!"

"You think he's here?"

"Of course he is! Oh, dad!" she stamped away. Kent stumbled over a chair in the darkened room, then moved on more cautiously, guided by the sound of her footsteps. A light came on, toward the rear of the house, and he could see his way.

He stopped at the door to a lighted bedroom. Kilgore was sprawled, fully clothed, on the bed. Frances was shaking him. "Dad! Dad!"

Kent moved up beside her, watching her anxiously, filled with her distress. As long as he didn't look at Kilgore, he could hold off his worst fears. If Kilgore was dead, he wouldn't need to look at him. He could feel with France's fingers, and see with her eyes.

"Dad! Wake up—oh, dad!"

There was something more strange, more menacing than death itself in all of this. For if this man was dead, he had killed himself. That would be so much worse than dying in any other way and so much harder for Frances to bear.

Kent was living through all of the agony that would be hers, sharing the disgrace, the bewilderment that would engulf her, when he heard an unmistakable hiccough. Never in his life had he heard such a delightful sound. Never had he known such immense and immediate relief.

Kilgore was drunk.

Frances was sobbing, "Oh, dad! Why did you do it? You were lonesome, weren't you? I shouldn't have gone away and left you. Oh dad!"

Kent chortled, "Dad, you old son-of-a-gone!" His arms went out and around Frances, moved by an irresistible impulse, part joy and relief, and part just honest desire to hug her. He hugged her and kissed her. "Dad, I'm nuts about your daughter! I want to marry her, dad! How about it?"

Her astonishment was all to the good. He had no trouble kissing her again, while she stared at him. After that her astonishment seemed to melt. She closed her eyes. She went limp.

Maybe she was fainting with the shock of it, or maybe she just liked being kissed. He decided that she liked it.

Presently, when she opened her eyes, there was a glow in them which proved it. She liked it! She was snuggling against him, asking with her eyes and her lips for more, when suddenly she tensed, tightened her mouth into an unkissable shape and screamed, "Stop it! Let me go!"

Kent had an arm-lock on her that was hard to unfasten. It took him some seconds, and all the time she was scratching and screaming.

"You—you tinhorn! You cheat!—"

It all came back to him, the shock of learning who she was, the misery of winning her cattle—he couldn't have felt worse about it if they had all turned out to be milk cows.

"I don't want your cattle," he shouted. "I won't take 'em!"

KILGORE was struggling to sit up. "What in hell's—hic—goin' on? Frances! You—you here?"

Frances sank down beside him, "Oh, dad! I came back. I couldn't go away and leave you."

He sat, weaving, on the side of the bed, trying to focus his eyes on her. "You—come back? You come back?"

"Yes, I'll never leave you again!"

He muttered, "You know—what happened?"

"Yes, I know all about it. This—this man told me. But it makes no difference. We can start all over again. We can start all over again. We can build up another herd—"

"I tell you I ain't goin' to take the cattle!" Kent declared.

Kilgore lifted his head, groggily, and looked at Kent. "What's that you say?"

By saying it over again, Kent began to realize what he was proposing to do, and he was beginning to enjoy the idea. He watched the erpression of amazement coming over Kilgore's face, his disbelief, his hope. "You—you're tauntin' me! You come to taunt me!"

"I mean it. I don't want your cattle." Kent had never believed in Santa Claus, before. Now *he* was Santa Claus; and there was no doubt of his existence.

It was a wonderful feeling, till Frances spoke. "You think you can buy me with five hundred cattle?"

And she jerked the Santa Claus mask right off his face, white beard and all. She understood him better than he had understood himself. He had fancied himself doing a fine, generous thing. But it wasn't; it was a crude, selfish thing. He had thought he could win her favor in this way, that was his true reason for making the offer.

"What's this?" muttered Kilgore. "What are you talkin' about.?"

"He followed me home," said Frances. "He—he kissed me!"

Kilgore was struggling to get to his feet. "Why you—you—"

"Tinhorn?" suggesetd Kent. "That's what everybody calls me around here."

"I'll kill you!" yelled Kilgore, awkwardly grappling at his holster. But he didn't have a gun.

"Here's your gun," said Kent. "Remember? I took it away from you."

Kilgore sank back on the bed, as if he had been shoved backwards. He stared up at Kent for a moment, then he dropped his head, muttering, "Get out of here! Leave us alone!"

Frances cried, "You took his gun? Then you *did* cheat him!"

Kent waited for Kilgore to explain, if he wanted to.

"Yes, he cheated me!" Kilgore said thickly. "He cheated me out of—peace. He ruined me, and then he wouldn't let me—go!"

Kent listened in astonishment. This was the thanks he got for saving the man's life.

Kilgore weaved and nearly fell from the bed. Frances caught him, and held him in her arms.

"Take the cattle and go!" Kilgore said. "I've got my daughter. That's all I want. You can't have her! You want her, too, don't you? But you can't have her! I'll kill you before I'll let you have her! I'll kill her! I'll kill myself!"

Kent turned away in bitterness and disgust. He'd go. He'd take the cattle. He told himself that he'd got far the better part of the bargain. The girl was crazy, just like her old man. He was lucky to get away from her. Yeh. This was his lucky night!

But now it was morning. A bleak, empty, hollow morning hit him in the face as he stepped from the house. He got his horse. He wondered where the cattle were. He couldn't take them by himself. He would have to have help.

But he didn't want the damned cattle. He would sell them, of course. He would find a buyer in Arapahoe.

But he remembered that in Arapahoe, he would also find Trotter—and Paddy and Skid—

TROTTER was suffering the misery of a busted head, shattered pride, and financial chaos as he lay that morning in a room in the Beef Stew and stared with swollen, blackened, sullen eyes at Paddy Trimm.

Paddy didn't feel so good himself. He had let eight thousand, four hundred and fifty dollars slip through his fingers.

"You let him get away, and now you want me to pay you for it?" He clasped his hands upon his stomach and looked down scornfully at Trotter.

"I took care of Fogle," Trotter growled.

"That was nothing. An old man like that, he didn't try to fight. I pay you to take the tough ones."

"You're goin' to pay me for takin' Fogle, too!"

Paddy sighed. "Yes, I suppose I will. I am soft-hearted. I am easy."

"Yeah, you're soft-hearted as a sidewinder. You're as easy to get money out of as a locked safe!"

"You've got plenty out of me. What do you do with all the money I give you? Don't tell me. I know. You gamble it away. You're no gambler. You've got no sense with cards. If you would just attend to your own business—"

"I wish to God I had! My business is raisin' cattle. If I'd stayed with that instead of gettin' mixed up with you, I'd been all right."

"You'd been no better off than you are. You had a good ranch, didn't you? Five years ago when your father died, the Fiddle Bow was worth a hundred thousand dollars. What's it worth now? How many cattle you got now?"

"I got five thousand—on the books."

"Ya! Ha! On the books! How many you on the range? Only the ones you can't catch. The wild ones you can't get out of the brush, you've got."

"Is that any of your damned business?"

"Of course it's my business. Everything that happens is my business. You'd like to sell your ranch for a hundred thousand dollars, now, wouldn't you?"

Trotter grunted. "And maybe I will."

"You could sell a cattle ranch with no cattle?"

"You've sold a lot of 'em that way!" said Trotter.

"But that is me. I have buyers. I have connections."

"I'll find a buyer."

"And where will you find a buyer? The buyers are not here. If they were, they'd know you have no cattle. The buyers are in Chicago, New York, in London. They buy cattle ranches, and what difference does it make whether they have any cattle or not? Just so long as they get dividends on their investments."

Trotter blinked. "How in hell do you do it, Paddy?"

"We sell 'em on book count, strictly. We hire a manager to run the ranch for the new owner, who's never seen his ranch and don't want to, likely. All he wants is dividends. Say he has bought five thousand cattle, book count. Comes roundup time and we can only fine three thousand head. Too bad. Do we tell the new owner? Of course not. We sell off enough cattle to make up the difference between what he's got and what the yield on five thousand head would be. We send him the money. He is happy. Everybody is happy."

"But you're sellin' off the herd. In a few years you won't have no cattle."

"Like you, yes. By that time the cattle boom will be over. Boom! It is busted. Everybody's busted. Where did the cattle go? Nobody knows and nobody cares. Nobody wants any cattle then."

He smiled benignly. "Now, you think you can sell your ranch on book count for a hundred thousand? Oh, no. You couldn't do it because you don't have the connections. You are a good gun-fighter, Trotter. You can make a lot of money with your gun, but not with your head. Look what happened to your head last night when you run into a smart young fellow!"

"That tinhorn! I'll get him! Just wait!"

"You should have got him last night. It would have been worth five hundred dollars to you. And with you needing

money so bad, you could use five hundred dollars?"

"It was Frances comin' back that done it. When I seen her, I was stumped for a minute. That was when he slugged me. But I'll get him, if he ever shows up around here any more."

"He will. He's got five hundred head of cattle to sell."

"Let him try to sell 'em! Let him show up around here, tryin' sell them cattle!"

"You're in not much condition to stop the sale. I might buy the cattle and then—but no. He will take no chances next time. He will put his money in the bank. And he will not accept cash after banking hours. Candice has told him—I wonder what she has told him?"

"She told him plenty, you can count on that. And he won't have no more dealin's with you. He'll steer clear of this town. He's clean to hell-and-gone by now."

"You wish that he is, maybe?"

"I wish to hell that he'd come walkin' in here right now! I'm bunged up pretty bad, and I can't see too good, but I could see him. I could see good enough to blast him. First, I'll gun-whip him. I'll beat him till he don't know nothin', and I'll take my time about it—um-m-m-m—"

HE WAS fairly lathering at the mouth when Paddy asked, "You could do that, when you can't stand up?"

"Who says I can't stand up?"

"You been laying here all morning. You hardly moved."

Trotter moved, just a little. Then he groaned. "I ain't goin' to move unless I have to."

Paddy turned away. "You want something to eat?"

"No! All I want is you to pay me what you owe me."

"You want me to give you money when you can't stand up? What would you do with it?"

"You're always worryin' about what somebody's goin' to do with his money. I can take care of it."

Paddy patted his hands together, one over the other, holding them on his stomach. "Suppose I sell your ranch for you? Suppose I sell the five thousand head of cattle you've got on your tally books?"

Trotter sat up. "You think you could?"

"Maybe."

"What—how much do you think you could get?"

"Five thousand head of cattle are worth a hundred thousand dollars, anyway. The ranch we throw in for good measure, huh?"

"Paddy, if you can get me a hundred thousand dollars, I'll—I'll—"

"You'll give me fifty thousand?"

Trotter yelped. "Fifty thousand! That's a stick-up!"

"Of course. It's a stick-up. And if I do it, I guarantee it will be more successful than the one you tried to pull last night. You agree?"

"I—don't know. *Fifty thousand—*"

"You think you could sell the ranch for fifty thousand?"

"I don't know—"

"You do know. You couldn't. But me, if I get you fifty thousand for your part, wouldn't that be good?"

"Y—yes. Hell yes, that would be good! Fifty thousand for my part. Is that the deal?"

"That's the deal."

"How you goin' to do it?"

"First, I get a buyer."

"Yeah, but where? How?"

"I got a brother who lives in Chicago. He's a commission man. He knows everybody. He gets me buyers."

"But when they come out here—"

"They don't come out here."

"You mean they take your word for it?"

"Not exactly. You have carried your original book account for five years. Everybody does it around here, you know. Everybody don't sell all their cattle as you have, though. They keep about the same figures because it is easier to do business with the bank if they have a good book count."

"But the bank knows—"

"The bank knows nothing. Do they go out and count the cattle? No. They go to the county clerk's office, where all sales and tallies are kept. I happen to know that the Fiddle Bow has five thousand head of cattle on the books at the county clerk's office, too."

Paddy smiled. "You see, I know the county clerk, too. I've got connections."

A truculent voice came from outside the room. "I mean to see Paddy! Where's he at?"

Paddy murmured, "Sounds like a dissatisfied customer. I wonder who?"

SKID thrust his long head and neck into the room without showing any of the rest of himself. "It's Jim Sunberry!" he whispered. "He's on the prod."

Paddy's eyes were hard and his voice syrupy. "Sunberry? He wants to see me?"

Jim Sunberry pushed past Skid. "That's what I said."

"All right, my friend. What can I do for you?"

"You can fork over the money you took off Fogle when you killed him!"

"*I* took money off Fogle? *I* killed him?"

Sunberry looked at Trotter. "You two worked together on it. You killed him and robbed him because he was winnin' too much."

Trotter got to his feet unsteadily. Sunberry had come prepared this time. he had a gun, and he was ready to use it.

"Of all things!" ejaculated Paddy. "I'm shocked!"

"You're liable to be shot, too," said Sunberry. And to Trotter, "Why don't you pull your gun?"

Trotter sat down. "Look at me. I can't even stand up. Besides, I don't want to shoot you, Jim. You've got me wrong."

"Looks to me like I've got you right. Right where I want you."

"You want to jump on me when I'm in this shape?"

"Look at me!" said Sunberry. "Look at the shape I'm in!" He stretched his lips and showed a stretch of bloody, toothless gum. "That's what you done to me!"

"You can still see. I can't. I'll fight you when I can see."

Paddy added a pious warning. "You can't fight a man who is blind, my friend."

"He went blind awful damned quick. But I can't hake him fight me if he hasn't got the guts."

"He is not afraid to fight you, and you are lucky that he can't. Come, have a drink. Calm yourself down." He gave Skid a look. "Take him up to the bar, Skid. Get him anything he wants."

"You think you can soft-soap me out of it, don't you? But you can't. You're a good talker, maybe you're too damned smooth for me. But I'm goin' to raise so much hell that you'll have to pay me."

"Pay you? For what? I don't know how much money Fogle had on him when he died. That's a matter you'll have to take up with the undertaker. But do you have a right to that money? You were no kin to Fogle, were you?"

"He didn't have no kin folks that I know of. I worked for him for fifteen years. He owed me wages."

"Well, all of that will be straightened out in due time by proper authorities. Come on, now. Have a drink."

He led Sunberry out of the room and up to the bar.

Skid followed.

"Let Jim have anything he wants," Paddy told a bartender. "And all he wants."

With another look at Skid, Paddy backed away. Muttering to himself, Jim Sunberry took the bottle which the bartender pushed toward him. While the cowman gulped the whiskey, Skid hovered near him, unnoticed. Skid was so intent upon his special duties that he did not watch the incoming customers.

One of them was Kent.

Kent had just come from the bank, where he had deposited eight thousand dollars, and he had four hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket. It was the first time he'd ever had money in the bank, and it gave him a wonderful feeling.

He had tried to calculate how long it would take a man to earn eight thousand dollars working for forty dollars a month—the prevailing wages for a cowhand.

Or how long it would take to make that much money concentrating on milking cows.

When he got to thinking of cows, he began to lose his elation. He had explained the situation to the banker, who said the bill sale looked all right to him, but that he might have trouble selling the cattle. He pointed out the fact that Kent was a stranger and would be judged a gambler, whether he was or not; and that a strange gambler was automatically under suspicion. People would take the point of view that he had swindled Kilgore out of his cattle. And nobody would contribute to the swindle by buying the cattle.

SO IT looked as if Kent had five hundred cattle that he couldn't sell or give away. From his boyhood days he had hated cattle and had promised himself when he grew up he wouldn't look at a cow. And now he had a whole damned herd!

Of course, he could simply ride off and leave the cattle where they were. In that case, Kilgore would undoubtedly retain possession of them. But Kent was determined now that Kilgore shouldn't have them. The refusal of Frances and her father to accept the cattle as a gift rankled deeply.

But it was foolish to think that he couldn't find a buyer in the midst of the biggest cattle boom of history! If he couldn't sell them in Arapahoe, he would hire some cowhands and drive them to market.

When it came to selling the cattle, Kent fully expected to encounter more violent opposition than the passive code of ethics in such matters. He knew the opposition of Trotter Bates would take a far more positive form. He didn't know just how soon Trotter would be able to do anything about it, however, and he thought he might as well find out.

Thus he had come to the Beef Stew looking for a prospective buyer, and at the same time looking for Trotter Bates.

When he saw Skid hovering around a cowhand who was drinking alone at the bar, he watched with considerable interest. The cowhand he recognized as Jim Sunberry, since he had seen the encounter between him and Trotter.

Candice had said Skid's specialty was lifting a man's gun, and then shooting him. A nice trick if he could do it. And he had proved that he could—at least he, or someone, had lifted Kent's gun, and Kent was still plagued about that.

There were several men at the bar,

but the dance floor and card tables were deserted. Kent poured his drink, watching Skid from the corner of his eye. He made sure that Jim Sunberry had a gun—it rested against the cowman's long, bended leg like a sawed-off limb of a crooked tree. Skid was lolling against the bar, motionless from his neck down, but his neck was writhing in that slow, sinuous movement which was habitual with him.

If he made any other move, Kent didn't see it. But presently Kent saw that Sunberry's gun was gone. Then he saw Skid straighten and say something to Sunberry, who whirled about, his hand dropping to his holster.

Although Kent knew what to expect, there was an astonishing swiftness and precision to this pattern of murder that was being drawn in front of his eyes. He was ready to prevent it, but hadn't decided exactly how. There was only one way now.

It was his aim to disable the man, and his aim was fairly good. The bullet hit Skid in the left shoulder and spun him around facing Kent. It was not surprising that he then blasted away at Kent. The surprising thing was the way he absorbed Kent's bullets.

He writhed and he weaved and he kept shooting, after four slugs had ripped into him. He apparently couldn't see where he was shooting, and Kent was in no more danger than the others around him. So he emptied his gun. It was like killing a snake, shooting it to pieces, without being able to hit the thing in the head.

The fellow coiled up on the floor when he could no longer hold the gun and went into a series of reptilian contortions that seemed never to end. It was decidedly weird and not a little revolting.

A bystander had to suffer the consequences of Skid's wild shooting. He was clinging to the bar, groaning in pain.

In the resulting confusion Kent stood aside, his gun reloaded and at his finger tips. Paddy bustled about, giving orders, clucking in pious reproof.

"You came back here to make trouble?" he said, stopping in front of Kent. "You will have all you want."

Kent wondered how many of the men bunched around him worked under his orders, and if they already had their orders. He felt a subdued but unmistakable hostility on all sides. He had to watch everybody. He couldn't do it. He moved back against the bar. Still there were the bartenders behind him, and they most certainly were under Paddy's orders.

"I've got all the trouble I want right now, it looks like," he said, grimly.

If they wanted to kill him publicly, they could do it now. It would have to carry some semblance of being a fair fight, perhaps, and in that event he would be able to make a battle of it. But he had no stomach for this fight, which had developed around him like a whirlwind born on an empty prairie. It had come from nothing. It might make a big fuss for a little while, and then go back to nothing.

WOULD he die like this? He had wondered about it many times in his life. There had been many fights, and there had been accidents—little things like the twisting of a horse's leg, or the twisting of a word into an insult. And that was the way men died. Unexpectedly, quickly.

This was all accidental, his happening along just in time to get mixed up in a fight that meant nothing to him. He had himself to blame, of course, for coming into the place. He should have stayed away. Suppose he got killed before he had a chance to enjoy that eight thousand dollars in the bank?

"This is *my* fight, I reckon," drawled

a voice. Jim Sunberry had regained his gun, and his casual pronouncement drew the attention away from Kent.

Kent was willing to concede the fact: This was Sunberry's fight. Kent could ease out of it, maybe, and he wouldn't be so rash any more. He must remember that he had eight thousand dollars in the bank.

"There'll be no more fighting in my place!" Paddy announced. "I will not have it. This fighting, this killing. Why should there be? Is everybody crazy? Yes! I'm crazy, too. It wasn't like this in the old days, before the town was filled with strangers—gambling, cheating, tsk, tsk, tsk!"

Kent knew this was a crack at him, but he let it pass. He was too much relieved to hear Paddy call off the fight —at least for the present.

It was odd in a way this reluctance to being drawn into a fight—any fight. He had always been ready to join in, whether it was his fight or somebody else's. Then why this sudden change in him? There was just one answer: Money in the bank. It changed a man. It made him a solid, substantial citizen. It made him think about dying. It made him wonder what would happen to his money in case he died.

Men were moving about, beginning to talk again, and life resumed its languid course here in the Beef Stew. It was more subdued than before; it was filled with eyes; it eddied about Kent without touching him. He was marooned and isolated, and he saw that he could do no business here.

He was leaving when Jim Sunberry caught up with him, and walked with him outside without speaking. The sidewalk thumped with the feet of the curious who had come to see what the shooting was about and were now moving away. The sandy street glared with mid-day sun, and many little tails of dust wriggled down the wind .

"It gives a man a funny feelin'—walkin' along the street, out here in the sun and wind, comin' out of the dark stinkin' dump, knowin' you would be layin' back there right now dead if a stranger hadn't come along and saved your life." Sunberry spoke with the maudlin eloquence of the drunk.

"It feels better out here, all right," Kent agreed.

"I don't know who you are, stranger, and I don't know why you saved my worthless hide, but if there's anything I can do for you, ever in my life, all you got to do is say the word."

It occurred to Kent that this man might be able to help him get rid of the cattle. "You want a job?" he asked.

"Workin' for you?"

"For a little while. I've got five hundred head of cattle out here I want gathered up and drove to market."

"Just tell me where they're at. I'll do it and it won't cost you a cent."

"I'll pay you, of course. Know where you can get some help?"

"Sure, I can get all the help I need. I've got a crew workin' for me out at the Circle F. Reckon I'll be out of a job now, anyway, now that Fogle's dead." Then he asked, "Where's these cattle of yours?"

"They belonged to George Kilgore. Guess you know him?"

"Sure. You bought his cattle?"

"No. I won them in a poker game."

"Oh!" Sunberry's warm, worshipful manner changed somewhat. "So you're a tin—a gambler!"

"No."

"You ain't a cowman," said Sunberry, questioningly.

"No. I—" It wasn't often that Kent felt obliged to explain what or who he was, and it wasn't easy to do. He was nothing. He was nobody. It was very pleasant being a nobody and doing nothing, drifting along without thought of the future or the past, following only

the dictates of his whims. There were no responsibilities, no irksome ties, no troubles—none that he hadn't been able to shoot away.

BUT now things had changed. He had cattle. He had money in the bank. "I'm just a trader," he said.

Sunberry's opinion of a trader didn't seem to be much better than a gambler. but he said doggedly, "You saved my hide, and I'll do anything you want me to."

Kent was nettled. "You don't have to work for me if you don't want to, you know."

"Sure, I'll work for you. Why not?"

"Well, why not?"

Sunberry grinned, sheepishly. He put out his hand. "My name's Jim Sunberry."

"Yes, I know. Mine's Kent Keith." He accepted the outstretched hand. "I think we'll get along."

"Sure, we'll get along."

Kent showed him the bill of sale and told him the job of gathering the cattle and putting them on the trail was up to him. "I'm not much good when it comes to handlin' cattle," he explained. He did not add that it was a job he hated. "I may ride along with you after you get started. You get your men, gather the stuff, and I'll catch up with you along the trail. How long you think it will take to get started?"

"I'm ready to start right away. How about a wagon and grub, and a cook?"

"I'll buy an outfit and you get a cook."

It was five days later when Kent and Sunberry rode up to the Kilgore ranch. It had been quite a struggle for Kent to make up his mind to come along. It would have been so much easier to let Sunberry do this, but he decided that it would also have been cowardly.

Frances came to the door. At sight of him, she stiffened visibly and her eyes on fire.

"Where's your dad?" he asked.

"What do you want with him?"

"I come for the cattle."

She gasped. "You can't do this!"

He too was beginning to think he couldn't do it. Sight of her brought back all the pain, all the humiliation, and all of the longing that she had previously aroused in him.

She was as scornful this morning as she was beautiful. She was a challenge and a lure. At that moment he would have given five hundred cattle just to touch her hand in friendship and to see her eyes lose their scorn.

"I offered to give 'em back, you remember," he muttered. "You wouldn't take 'em."

"As a gift, no! That would have put me—us under obligation to you."

The sting of it caused the blood to burn his face and he hoped that Sunberry, sitting on his horse at the gate, could not hear.

"Those cattle don't belong to you!" she went on passionately. "You cheated him!"

Yes, he had cheated Kilgore out of his escape from disgrace through death. He could tell her, of course. Would that cause her to hate him less? Probably not. Kilgore was obviously ashamed of his suicide attempt and hadn't told her. It was probably just as well. Kent had learned the very bitter lesson that there are times when you get no thanks for saving a man's life.

"I've got a bill of sale for 'em, just the same," he said. "And I've come for 'em."

Her face settled into bleak lines and her lips moved contemptuously. "Well, we don't keep them in the house!"

His eyes blurred with fury as he turned away. He owed her no explanation. He had wanted to give them fair

notice, that was all. But you couldn't be fair to these people; they would twist it into something else, and hate you for it.

He was glad to get out of her sight, and as he rode away he never expected to see her again, and hoped he wouldn't. At the same time, he turned in his saddle for one last look. She stood in the doorway, not nearly so straight nor so scornful, but wilting slowly. Kent felt himself wilting too.

Sunberry said, "She shore cracks a sharp tongue, don't she?"

THIS snapped him out of it, and brought back the sting. He turned his mind to the job at hand. . . .

As Frances watched them ride away, she really wasn't wilted down so badly. She was thinking frantically: What can I do? I must stop them somehow!

She ran out the back of the house, down the path that led to the spring. Her father was pulling a trotline out of the stream of clear cold water that flowed over the rock retaining wall and down the little creek.

"Dad! He's here!"

"Who?"

"That gambler. He says he's going to take the cattle!"

Kilgore stood like one of the big gray stones he was leaning against. He stared down the creek for a long time. Then he began pulling on the trotline again.

"What are we going to do?" Frances demanded.

"Nothin'." Kilgore took a bottle of beer from the trotline, pulled the cap with his teeth, and sat down on a rock.

"You're not going to let him take the cattle! You've got to do something!"

Kilgore put the bottle to his mouth and drank it all without stopping. He wiped his lips on his shirt sleeve. "Nothin' I can do now. I give him the bill of sale."

Frances stared at him with mounting indignation and fury. "You — you're goin' to sit there and drink beer while somebody takes your cattle?"

He muttered, "I played poker. I lost. That's all."

"All? All!" She picked up the discarded beer bottle and dashed it against the rock wall. "You played poker. You lost. Now you drink your beer. *I'll* do something!"

She had no idea what she could do, as she ran back to the house. But she knew that she couldn't give up the cattle without a fight. Her father was old and beaten. He hadn't been the same since that awful night. He'd probably never be the same again. It was up to her now to take charge of things.

Her first thought was of Trotter. She knew he would help her, but she was reluctant to call on him since the unexplained "hold-up." She had recalled some of the things he said that night before he recognized her. About Paddy Trimm, and the girl Candice; it showed that he was connected with Paddy in some way, and she didn't want to believe that.

She knew Paddy Trimm for a hypocritical crook, who preached against gambling and ran the biggest gambling house in the country. She knew that Trotter loafed around the Beef Stew a good deal, but she hadn't thought he was mixed up with Paddy. Now, she wasn't so sure.

But she needed someone to help her, and she needed help bad. First, she would go to the county clerk and ask him if there was any legal redress. If not—well, then she would go to Trotter.

She saddled up and started for town. As she crossed Silver Creek and came out of the dip of the ford, she saw an approaching rider.

The big white horse was undoubtedly Trotter's, but the rider who lolled in

the saddle with hat at a rakish angle couldn't be Trotter!

But it was: Trotter in a very mellow mood, singing rapturously. It was the first time she had ever seen him drunk, and it was something of a shock.

He greeted her hilariously. "Honey! You and me are goin' to get married!"

"Well! How interesting!"

"We're goin 'to take a trip around the world! Yes, sir. Clean around the world."

Ever since she could remember, she had heard him talk of making a trip around the world. He had got as far as El Paso a couple of times.

"I haven't got time to listen to your silliness, Trotter. I'm in a hurry."

"Silliness? Listen to me, woman! You're goin' to marry me, and we're goin' around the world."

"You're going home and sleep it off. Go on!" She tried to ride past him, but he grabbed her bridle reins.

"You think I'm drunk? Well, maybe I am. I'm celebratin', that's all. A man's got a right to celebrate, ain't he, when he gets fifty thousand dollars?"

"You're out of your head, and I—I *needed* you, Trotter!"

"Fifty thousand dollars, honey! I sold my ranch and my cut is fifty thousand dollars!"

SHE saw that he was even drunker than she thought. "Now, you listen to me! I'm having trouble enough of my own, without putting up with you. They're taking our cattle! Are you too drunk to understand that?"

"That gambler who cheated dad out of the cattle has come after them. He has Jim Sunberry and a bunch of Circle F men. I'm going to town to see what can be done about it."

"The hell you say! The hell he is! I'll show him! I'll—I'll—"

"Yes, what will you do?"

"I'll kill him, that's what I'll do!"

"That's not a bad idea," she said bleakly. "If you could do it."

"*If* I could do it? *Me*?"

"You're a big man, Trotter. But right now you're drunk. And he's out there with half a dozen men."

"What do I care how many men he's got? I'll get a dozen men!"

She smiled a little. Maybe he wasn't so drunk, after all. "I'll talk to the county clerk, first. Maybe there's some way to stop him by law."

"You know there ain't no law here since they run Marshal Butts out of town!"

Yes, she knew that. And she knew that Paddy Trimm was responsible for running the marshal out of town. She wondered if Trotter had a hand in that too."

"I'll stop him!" Trotter said. "Just leave it up to me."

She didn't want to leave it up to him, but since she had told him about it she didn't have much choice in the matter.

"I'll go back to town and get a bunch of men, and we'll be right out."

"Where will you get them?"

"Paddy—that is, there'll be a gang around the Beef Stew I can pick up."

After all, what did she care where he got the men? Just so long as he came to her rescue. Since there was nothing she could do at the ranch, she decided to go along with him. And he offered no objections. He sobered up rapidly as they galloped on.

"It's too bad," she said, "to ruin your pleasant dreams of fifty thousand dollars and a trip around the world."

"Hell, that ain't no dream! I tell you I sold my ranch."

"Not for fifty thousand dollars!"

"No. For a hundred thousand."

She was really worried about him now. Maybe he wasn't drunk at all. Maybe he was crazy.

"But all I get out of it is fifty thousand," he went on. "It ain't right. In

fact, it's a damned gyp. But you can't talk Paddy out of nothin' — the old snide!"

"What's Paddy got to with it?"

"He sold the ranch for me."

"Oh, I might have known. And you really have fifty thousand dollars?"

"I ain't got the money yet. But he's got a buyer."

She laughed. "And has he seen your cattle?"

"No, and he ain't goin' to. He lives in New York."

"But—that's silly. A man buying a ranch for a hundred thousand dollars without ever seeing it!"

"Paddy's sold a lot of 'em that way. And he's got a lot of satisfied customers back there. The buyer he's got for my place knows some of them other birds that have been makin' big money in the cattle business, and he's awful anxious to buy a cow ranch. You see, Paddy pays 'em dividends, and he says that's all they care about."

She plied him with questions. She learned that he had been carrying the original count on his tally books, and that it had never been changed at the county clerk's office. She learned that practically all the ranches now changing hands were being sold on book account. It was a practice all accepted, and until somebody stopped to count the cattle there would be no trouble.

"Why, you're selling cattle that don't exist!" All the intricacies of business and finance could not gloss over this single fact, and it dazed her.

"Sure. And a lot of 'em is doin' the same thing. Paddy says it don't make no difference to them fellers back in New York. Why, you know what they do? They buy thousands of bushels of wheat and corn and they never see a grain of it. A lot of 'em don't know wheat from corn, if they saw it. They just buy pieces of paper that's supposed to be a lot of wheat and corn, and they turn around and sell the paper to somebody else. And they make a hell of a lot of money."

"It all sounds crazy to me," he continued, "but Paddy says that's the way they run Big Business. And if I can get fifty thousand dollars for a herd of cattle that I sold off a long time ago—well, I'm in favor of Big Business!"

FRANCES didn't believe it could be done. She didn't believe any man would buy corn without getting the corn, or at least seeing it. And she didn't believe any man would buy cattle without seeing them.

She quit thinking about it. She had much more urgent things to think about. When they got to town, she went to the county clerk's office and Trotter stopped at the Beef Stew.

Trotter found Paddy pacing the floor of his office in great agitation.

"Where in hell have you been?" Paddy cried. "I've looked the town over for you!"

"I've been home, that is I started home—"

"Home? I didn't know you ever went home. You're under my feet all the time except when I want you—"

"Listen, fat boy! I ain't never been under nobody's feet and—"

"Oh, shut up. I'm sick of your bragging, anyhow. If you had more brains and less brag you might be able to help me."

"Help *you?*" It wasn't like Paddy to ask anybody for help. "I've got a pretty good-sized job on my hands right now, myself, but—"

"You've always got a big job on your hands, haven't you. Now we'll see how big a job you can handle."

"What is it? What in hell's the matter?"

Paddy stopped in front of him and clasped both hands over his ball-like belly.

"The buyer is coming to see the ranch!" he announced.

"The—buyer? *My* ranch?"

"The buyer. Your ranch."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. It's the first time for things to go wrong. It's a bad sign. Buyers are getting suspicious. Money, maybe, is getting tight. The boom is over. BOOM! What a smash it will be!"

It was indeed a terrible smash to Trotter. All of his hopes, all of his dreams of marrying Frances and taking her on a trip around the world.

"What—what are we goin' to do?" he croaked.

"That, my fine friend, is what I'm trying to decide. You have a ranch, yes. But you have no cattle. He will want to see your cattle."

"But he couldn't do that—even if I had 'em. We'd have to have a roundup and everything."

"He might not want to see all of them, that is not to be expected. He can see your tally books. He can go to the county clerk and see the records. That is enough—*if* you had some cattle to show him, say a thousand head, or even five hundred."

Trotter moved his head groggily. "Hell, I ain't got a hundred head!"

Paddy resumed his aimless walking. The only noise he made was the flapping of his house slippers against his heels.

"Did you say—five hundred?" Trotter was lifting his head under the weight of a staggering idea. "Five hundred head of cattle?"

"I said five hundred might do."

"Suppose I get five hundred and scatter 'em out on my range?"

Paddy's eyes took on a calculating gleam. "Yes. Yes, that might do. We could buy five hundred head, or a thousand!"

"We don't have to buy 'em. We can borrow 'em!"

"*Borrow* them? And whose cattle do you borrow?"

"Kilgore's!"

Trotter explained what he had come to town for. "You see, I take the cattle away from the tinhorn, and of course I blast him to hell while I'm doin' it; and then I take the cattle over to my ranch!"

THERE was one hitch. Kilgore's cattle would, of course, wear his brand. However, Paddy thought this a minor obstacle. This dude buyer knew nothing about brands. If the brand wasn't pointed out to him, he'd probably never see it. "Just don't let him get too close to the cattle," Paddy advised. "If Kilgore will consent to the loan of the cattle—"

"Why not? I'm keeping the tinhorn from runnin' off with 'em, ain't I?"

Paddy smiled cynically. "That, of course, is to be seen."

"You think I can't do it?"

"That," said Paddy, "is your problem, and one which is more in your line."

"You're damn right, it's in my line! You just let me have half a dozen, no, a dozen men, and I'll have them cattle before you can shake a drunk down."

"A dozen men? Don't you want thirty or forty men? An army, maybe?"

"I've got to have some help roundin' up the cattle and takin' 'em to my place."

Paddy was thoughtful. "Why not let the tinhorn and his crew round them up for you, since they have already started the job?"

This appeared to be a good idea. "That might work out all right. After they get the cattle gathered up and start out with 'em—yeh, it might be easier that way!" . . .

The night was black, and there was a smell of rain in the air. Trotter rode at the head of the procession. He knew

exactly where the cattle would be bedded down.

For a week he had watched the progress of the roundup, keeping well out of sight himself, but knowing each night where the herd was and about how many cattle it contained. Everything had been taken—cows, calves, yearlings, steers. A very good job had been done and Trotter appreciated it. He would thank this tinhorn personally. And then he would blow his damned head off.

He stopped his horse and called in a low voice: "Wait here!" He rode on alone.

He had left his favorite white horse at home, and the bay he rode was skittish. It started to whinny and Trotter jerked it savagely. It had seen other animals in the darkness.

Here at the fork of Silver Creek and Catclaw River was an ideal bed ground for trail herds heading for the northern markets. Kilgore's cattle were here tonight, on the first leg of their long trek.

A distant flash of sheet lightning revealed them, bedded down, quietly. Trotter also saw the wagon on the bank of the river and knew the crew would be sleeping near it—with the exception of the night herders. He would have to locate them first.

For fear that his horse would give him away, he turned back to the waiting crew. "Keep this damned horse quiet," he told Cotter Blaine, who could be trusted to keep the men quiet as well as the horse. "If there's any shootin', wade in."

He ordered Little Jack Seidler, who was quick and light on his feet and could see with the eyes of an owl, to go along with him. "We'll find the night herders."

They kept to the windward of the herd, moving quietly through a scattering of pecan trees. There was another flash of lightning, brighter now, and a cow bawled nervously.

"See anybody?" whispered Trotter.

"Not yet," said Little Jack. "Wait!"

Long before Trotter could make out anything, Little Jack said, "Here he comes!"

He was humming a song, this night rider as he made his lonely round:

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie-e-e-e-"

"Want me to get him?" asked Little Jack.

"No, I see him now! I'll get him."

The rider was within ten feet of them. Trotter lunged, caught the man by the arm. He let out a yell before Trotter could smash him—just one shrill sound that might have been made by a mountain lion. After that, he was quiet enough, though his horse made an awful clatter as it raced away.

Trotter swore. If this aroused the camp, there would be a melee, and he didn't want it that way. That would scare the cattle, and the main thing was to get the whole herd.

Next in importance was getting the "tinhorn." Trotter's desire to do this was almost as strong as his determination to get the cattle. If a hit-or-miss gun fight started, he couldn't be so sure of this.

For a few minutes he waited, and there was no indication that the sleeping men had been aroused. "Reckon there's another night herder?" he asked.

"Not likely for this size herd, but we'd better wait and see."

TROTTER was never good at waiting. It seemed that he had been waiting six months for this moment. It was very important that there be no slip-ups now. He had to have the cattle. The buyer would be showing up any day.

"Go back and get the others," he ordered. "Well surround the wagon. Re-

member, I don't want no wild shootin', if we can help it. Whatever happens, don't stampede the cattle."

With a dozen men at his heels, Trotter felt quite confident that he would have things all his way this time. But he was taking no chances. He stationed his men about the wagon before he approached the first sleeping figure.

Prodding him with the muzzle of his gun, he warned: "Keep your damned mouth shut now! Easy—easy!"

The man started up, then sank back to his knees when Trotter hissed, "Stay where you're at!"

"Who's in charge here?" Trotter asked.

"J-Jim Sunberry."

"Where's the tinhorn?"

"Who?"

"The gambler that Sunberry's workin' for."

"I don't know."

"Don't lie to me! I'll bash your head in!"

"I don't know nothin' about any gambler."

Trotter hit him with the gun, and he crumpled without a sound. Cautiously, Trotter approached the next one and aroused him in the same manner and asked the same question. He got practically the same answer.

With a snarl of rage, Trotter lashed at him, but he ducked away with a loud yell. Trotter blazed away at him. The camp boiled up into a wild, seething, struggling mass. Trotter's force outnumbered the cowhands two to one, and they had everything under control in a very few seconds.

Trotter found Sunberry, beaten and dazed, but still conscious. "Now, where the hell's the tinhorn?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," mumbled Sunberry.

Trotter slugged him with his fist. "You know who you're working for?"

Sunberry didn't seem to know that, now.

"Where's the man that hired you to round up these cattle?"

"I don't know."

Trotter lifted his gun threateningly. A flash of lightning came and then a clap of thunder. "Watch them cattle! Jack! Cotter! Muley! You hold the herd."

"Now," he said to Sunberry, "you point him out to me."

"He ain't here. I haven't seen him since we started gatherin' the cattle."

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know. He said he'd catch up with us after we got started."

Trotter had every man dragged into the light of a small camp fire for inspection. He had seen Kent but once, and then in the darkness; so he didn't know whether he had him or not. . . .

That night it poured—a blustery, blowing rain that relieved the atmospheric tension at least. It cleared the air of dust and banished the heat. The mid-summer morning was spring-like, and Kent was feeling more cheerful.

For the past week, he had been killing time, waiting for Sunberry to get the cattle rounded up. He had drifted south to Cedar Springs, just because he had never been to Cedar Springs, and because he didn't want to stay and help gather the cattle. He saw no reason why he should do a cowhand's work, when he had plenty of cowhands working for him and plenty of money to pay their wages.

He sampled the liquor in Cedar Springs, a little too freely; and spent a couple of days sleeping. If it hadn't been for the cattle, he would have kept right on going down the Bluestream River. He lolled along its bank and watched the water rushing past, on its way somewhere south, through new country all the way. New country. That's what he wanted to see. But he

was tied down. He had five hundred head of cattle. He had eight thousand dollars in the bank.

HE TOOK out his check book and looked at it for about the eight-thousandth time. He wanted to write a check. But he still had plenty of money. No need to write a check. No need to do anything but sit here on the bank of the Bluestream, and wonder what it looked like down stream.

It was time for him to go back. Sunberry had said he would have the cattle gathered in a week. There'd be no more work to do—just ride along with the herd. And if that got too slow, he could go on by himself.

If things had gone according to schedule, the cattle would be near the fork of Silver Creek and Catclaw River. They had probably bedded down there last night. They might have been hard to hold during the storm.

It took a good cowhand to handle cattle in a storm. Kent wasn't a good cowhand, and didn't want to be. Had he been there, he would have been shown up by the other hands.

"To hell with 'em," he told himself. "That's what I'm payin' 'em for."

He got to the bed grounds shortly after noon. The sun was now beating a humid heat from the wet earth, and there was little sign of the cattle that had been there the night before. There was enough, however, to show their presence and to guide Kent along their trail.

It was puzzling, however, for the sign showed that they had gone back west, instead of continuing north along the main trail. These might not be his cattle, of course, but there were no trail herds in mid-summer. So he followed them back through slippery hills, down across a wide, sloppy flat, toward a ranch at the foot of a gaunt mountain range.

The farther he went the more convinced he became that these were not his cattle, for they had been divided up in several bunches, branching off in different directions. He did not seriously consider the possibility that they had been run off by thieves; if so, why should they be scattered this way?

There was just enough mystery about it, and enough suspicion in the back of his mind that Trotter might have had something to do with this, to take him on watchfully. He was sure to find out something at this ranch.

There was one approach to it which appealed to him more than crossing the five miles or so of open flatland directly to the house. He didn't think there was much need of caution, but decided a little caution wouldn't do any harm.

He dropped into a brush-grown gulley lined with cowtrails, and followed it to a stretch of timber to the north. From there he made his way into the hills, then cut back to the ranch house.

The buildings extended over a large area and had evidently been at one time a bustling big outfit. But now they looked deserted and dilapidated.

He tied his horse to a tree and walked on to the house. A big Collie rushed out, barking. A pair of pigeons on top of the gallery flapped away noisily. He heards steps inside the house, and waited at the gate.

A girl appeared in the door, a girl who resembled Frances so much the sight of her took his breath. It tantalized him with hope that it was her, and chilled him with fear that it would be.

She moved back a step and he could scarcely see her. He stepped through the gate, only vaguely aware of the fact that the dog was leaping at him.

"Lobo!" cried the girl. It was the voice of Frances.

Snapping teeth were at Kent's throat. Instinctively he threw up an arm and knocked the dog aside.

Frances rushed across the gallery and ran to the dog, seizing him around the neck. "You crazy thing!" With the same agitation, she looked up at Kent and said, "Are you crazy too?"

"I reckon I am," he said, touching his throat.

"Why did you come here alone?"

"Alone?" he repeated.

"Aren't you alone?"

"No. You're here, ain't you?"

She was kneeling, holding the dog, and seemed exhausted with the struggle. "I ought to turn him loose on you! I don't know why I care what happens to you!"

"Turn him loose," said Kent. "I never seen a dog I couldn't make friends with." He smiled wryly. "I've seen some humans that I couldn't make up to."

"Lobo! I don't blame you. If I were a dog, I'd want to bite him too."

Kent chuckled dryly. "I'll give you both one bite. They say every dog is entitled to one, and I reckon a girl is too."

She pressed her lips in exasperation. "All right! You're so smart. I'll give Lobo the first bite."

SHE released the dog, and the animal leaped. Kent caught him by the throat. For a moment he held the dog in the air, kicking and snarling. Then he put him on the ground, loosed his hold, and began talking to him.

"What's the matter, Lobo? You wouldn't hurt me, would you? Somebody's trained you to act this way when strangers come around, didn't they? It ain't your fault . . ."

In a few seconds he had the dog quiet. "See?" He looked up at Frances. "I reckon you're next."

She looked as though she could really bite him. "No," she said. Trotter will be next. We'll see if you can tame him that way."

"Trotter? I'll have a try at taming him, but not exactly this way. Is he around here somewheres?"

"He'll be here very soon. This is where he lives, you know."

"No! I didn't know."

"Then you're not so brave—so foolish as I thought. What are you doing here?"

"I followed my cattle — somebody's cattle—" He paused, struck by a thought which seemed to hit him on top of the head and then crawl down his back.

"Whose cattle?" she asked maliciously.

He said firmly, "My cattle."

"Are you quite sure they are?"

"I got a bill of sale for 'em. But we've been over that once before. I'm not arguing about it with you. I reckon Trotter's got 'em now."

"You reckon quite right."

"And this is his place?"

"Yes."

"What did he bring 'em here for?"

She hesitated. "Maybe you better ask him to explain that. I'm sure he will, when he gets here—if you wait that long."

"Oh, I'll wait. I'm in no hurry."

She looked at him searchingly, then shrugged. "Suit yourself, of course. It's nothing to me."

"Ain't it? Then why are you here?"

"I—I'm just waiting for Trotter."

There were a lot of things to worry about besides that. Where was Sunberry and his crew? What had happened to the cattle? Where was Trotter now?"

But Kent's mind stubbornly came back to the one disagreeable fact: Frances was here in Trotter's house, obviously in on this deal. They had the cattle. They were working together.

And this was the thing that hurt: She had refused to accept the cattle from him as a gift, but was willing for Trotter to steal them for her.

"I didn't hardly think you'd go in for hi-jackin'," he said. "That's gettin' them back the hard way."

"Oh, it hasn't been so much trouble."

But he could see through her assumed callousness. "Did Sunberry just hand 'em over to you?"

She said quickly, "I wasn't there! I don't know anything about it!"

"You might not have been there, but you know a lot about it, don't you?"

Her lips tightened.

"You know that there was a good deal of trouble. You know a lot of men got hurt, some of 'em killed—like as not. All for what reason?"

"What are you driving at?" she cried.

"You know what I'm drivin' at. I offered to give you the cattle, and you wouldn't take 'em. You went and got Trotter to hi-jack 'em. Oh, it wasn't any trouble, you say! What do you care how many men get shot up? Just so you can thumb your nose at me!"

"No! I didn't! You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Then you tell me how it is."

"All right, I'll tell you! Trotter wanted the cattle. He wanted to—to borrow them."

"*Borrow* 'em?"

"Yes! I know it sounds silly, but—why should I be telling you this? What right have you to question me?"

He said dryly:

"As much right as you've got to hi-jack my cattle."

"Stop it! Stop saying that! We're just getting back what belongs to us. Is that 'hi-jacking'?"

"That's what I'd call it."

"Well, it isn't what I'd call it. And—and there's no use to talk about it any more." She turned toward the house. "You can stay here if you want to. I can't run you off. But I can warn you—Trotter will be here pretty soon. And he'll kill you!"

HE SMILED. "Well. That won't be any trouble, either, will it—for you?"

She made a sound full of distress and exasperation, and stamped into the house. Kent sank down on the gallery steps, stroking the Collie, who by this time had decided Kent was worthy of his trust and affection.

"Either you're wrong, Lobo, or she is," Kent mused.

Lobo tried to lick his face.

"You belong to Trotter? Then you think he's a fine fellow, too. Which shows you ain't a very good judge of men, Lobo. No, she's partly right about me. I'm not a crook, but I'm a lazy, good-for-nothin' bum. She knows that, Lobo, but you don't. Or maybe you just don't care. . . ."

"That's all very touching!" came Frances's voice. "And I know you're talking for my benefit."

"See there, Lobo!" Kent exclaimed. "What did I tell you? You can't fool that gal. If I knowed women they way she knows men, maybe I'd know what makes her act the way she does."

"How would you like for me to act?"

"Well, more like Lobo does."

"I see. You probably put women and dogs in the same class, when it comes to looking on men as their masters, adoring them, looking up to them—even though they are, according to their own admission, no-account bums."

"N—no, I don't expect a woman to look up to me—unless I changed my ways. But if the right woman come along, who knows?—Maybe I'd change 'em."

"She'd probably change them for you."

"That's what I mean. If she was a 'right woman' she would."

There was a long silence, which Frances broke with a startled sound. "What are we talking about? What are we sitting here for, like—like noth-

ing was going to happen?"

"Is something going to happen?"

"You're acting like you're not afraid. You're trying to impress me. But I'm not easy to impress!"

"You sure ain't. You're about the hardest girl I ever saw to—what was that you said—impress?"

"Oh, you talk so foolish! And you make me feel so foolish! I don't know what I'm doing, or what I'm talking about, when I'm with you a little while."

"That sounds good to me. Maybe you like me a little, after all."

"I don't know why I should? Do you?"

"It's not a matter of what you *should* do. You just like somebody, or you don't. Now, I like you, and have ever since I first got a look at you. And why should I? All you've done is bite my head off every time you open your mouth. But I like you just the same. Fact is, I like you so much I don't think I'm goin' to let Trotter have you."

"Oh! You—you don't! Just what are you going to do about it?"

"Wait till Trotter comes, and I'll show you."

"There you go with your silly talk again. Do you realize how foolish you sound? You're bragging to me that you're going to kill a man. As if that would make me like you! You should have lived back in the days of the cave man."

"I reckon I've got some cave man in me. I reckon we all have. Haven't you got a little bit of cave-woman in you?"

He hadn't looked at her, but he could feel the change in her, and his heart was hammering with hope again. He waited a long time for her to say something, just anything, so he could hear her voice and test the changing quality of it.

Always, when his hopes began to arise, she dashed them on the rocks—sharp, painfully pointed rocks. And he might have expected it this time. He ought not have been so surprised, but how could he help it?

"Come in the house," she said. "I've got a rifle aimed at your back.

HE SAT without moving. He was trying to put this together and make some sense of it. "Lobo," he said, "I give up. I think she's daffy. Don't you?"

Lobo panted a happy agreement.

"She tells me to come in the house. She tells me she's got a rifle pointed at my back. Does that make sense, Lobo? She could have just said, 'Come in the house'; and I'd been glad to."

He turned for a look at her. She wasn't fooling. She had a rifle aimed at him.

"Are you coming?" she said.

"Sure." He got up.

"And keep your hand away from your gun!" she warned.

He laughed. "Who's talkin' foolishness, now? You think I'd shoot you?"

"I don't know. But I'll shoot you, if you don't do what I say, and do it quick!"

He tried not to reveal the bewilderment he felt as he stepped toward the door. She back away, holding the rifle on him. "Come on in!"

"All right. Now what?"

"I'm going to put you in the pantry."

He gaped. "The—what?"

"There's a big pantry just off the kitchen. I want you to get in there, and keep quiet. Trotter is coming!"

A little light broke through, and then a blinding flash of it. She was trying to hide him from Trotter! And it wasn't Trotter she was afraid of getting hurt.

"I thought you had some cave-woman in you," he said.

He brushed the rifle aside and took

her in his arms. She struggled against him and her resistance did more to inflame him than anything else could have done. He had been joking about the cave-man stuff, but it was coming out in him now. He crushed her close and kissed her.

There was no power on earth, physical or moral, that could have kept him from doing it. He hardly knew what he was doing. She had tantalized him beyond all endurance; she had defied him, and he loved defiance

In the excitement of the moment, however, he had misjudged her motive in resisting him. He began to understand it as the frantic sounds she was making assumed the form of words in his ears.

"He's coming—he's coming in the house—he's at the door—!"

Even this didn't cool him down to a recognition of his danger. This was only an annoying interruption. But he released her, and she shoved him so hard that he nearly fell down.

"Get back in the kitchen—the pantry—!"

He'd be damned if he'd hide in the pantry, or anywhere else, like a man caught in a shameful act. Here was Trotter. And what of it? He would kill him, that's all.

Trotter strode into the room. "Well, everything worked out fine—" he rumbled cheerfully, and then he saw Kent.

Kent had all the time in the world, so he felt that he could afford to be liberal with it. He would give Trotter a chance to go for his gun, of course.

But Trotter only stared. Then he shot a look of inquiry at Frances. "Who's this?"

It was with some surprise that Kent realized Trotter did not know him. He had forgotten that Trotter had never seen him, face to face, before.

Frances made a squeaking noise that sounded like a mouse being stepped on. "He—he—he—"

Kent was ready to acknowledge the introduction with his forty-five.

"He's the—the man who wants to buy your ranch!" Frances said.

As much as this announcement stunned Kent, it seemed to stun Trotter more. The cowman lost all of his florid confidence, and most of his bullish belligerency. He swung his huge head in a series of up and down movements, like a critter choking on dry hay.

"Oh—h!" There was misery and anxiety in his exclamation, mixed with an intense desire to be pleasant. "Howdy do!" He walked toward Kent with hand extended. "Mighty glad to meet you."

THERE flashed through Kent's mind a brief suspicion—. Was this some kind of trick on him?—and then it was gone. Trotter was extending his right hand. Kent extended his.

"And I'm pleased to meet you," Kent said solemnly.

"You—you got here a little before we was expectin' you. Paddy said he'd bring you out—" Trotter wiped his face.

"I thought I'd rather ride out by myself, and kind of look around."

"Sure, sure. That's all right. How's it look to you—so far?"

"So far, so good," said Kent. "Of course I haven't seen much yet. I just got here a little while ago, and was talking to Miss—Miss—" He glanced at Frances.

"Kilgore," she said, weakly.

"Miss Kilgore has been tellin' me what a nice outfit you've got. She's quite a—good talker."

Trotter laughed boisterously. "She sure is, mister. I ought to let her sell the ranch, I reckon. She's a better talker than I am."

"That's not a bad idea."

A frown crossed Trotter's face, but

he quickly resumed his genial air. "I'll show you around, whatever you want to see. I reckon Paddy has told you all about the place, though."

"He's told me all the good things about it—except that he didn't say anything about Miss Kilgore."

"She don't go with the ranch," Trotter said, trying to make a joke out of it, but his displeasure was evident.

"Who does she go with?" Kent asked, coolly.

"Me."

"Oh, I see."

Trotter said with an ominous voice, "Now that we got that settled, Mr.—Spangler, ain't it?"

"O h—y e s—S p a n g l e r ! " said Frances.

"All right, Mr. Spangler, you want to take a look around?"

Kent nodded. He was still dazed with the audacity with which Frances had acted to postpone the inevitable showdown between him and Trotter. Why had she done it? Was he right in thinking that she was trying to protect him, that her feelings toward him had changed—or was he just hoping it so strongly he was thinking so?

As he followed Trotter to the door, he saw several men down at the corrals. They had obviously returned with Trotter, and it was not merely a matter of settling things with Trotter here and now, but settling with all of them.

Kent had a good deal of confidence in himself, a confidence that had been built up through his years of buffeting a none too gentle world. He was quite willing to take on Trotter at any time, even anxious to do so, but he wasn't hankering to fight half a dozen men.

How long could he put it off? How long would it be before Trotter discovered who he was?

"It's gettin' kind of late to see very much, but we'll take a little ride and you can get a look at some of the cattle," Trotter said. "I got five thousand head, you know, scattered all over the range, of course. We'll give you a look at some of 'em, just to show you what they look like."

"I don't know much about cattle," Kent said. "In fact, I don't care much about 'em."

Trotter stopped hopefully. "Don't you even want to see 'em?"

"Well—" Kent hesitated. There was just one thing he wanted, now. That was to find out how Frances felt about him. He looked back at her and tried to fathom her unfathomable eyes. They were full of anxiety now. Anxiety for him?

"If you don't mind, she said, hurriedly, "I'll go along with you."

"Of course I don't mind!" he said.

Trotter seemed less enthusiastic. But he offered no audible objections. He led the way to the corrals and ordered the horses saddled. Kent was relieved when Trotter asked nothing about his horse, which he had left in the timber west of the house. He wished now that he hadn't been so secretive. Discovery of the horse would reveal his suspicious approach, and Trotter might want to know why his prospective buyer should be suspicious.

BUT Trotter was apparently in a state of mind which did not foster attention to these small details. He fawned upon Kent, and frowned upon the attention Frances bestowed upon him. He talked in a constant uneasy rumble as they rode along.

"We got a lot of fine grazin' land here, you see, right in the middle of the summer and we haven't had a rain for a long time—up to last night—and the grass is still good and green in this valley."

"Looks like you haven't been grazin' it very much," Kent noted.

"The cattle stay back in the timber

during the summer, where it's cooler. Got a lot of grass back there too, and plenty of water. We got water everywhere, water and grass—that's all you need for a cow ranch. We got everything right here that you need."

"I don't see any cows," said Kent.

Trotter shot a queerly anxious look at him. "You don't expect me to go out and round up five thousand head of cattle just so's you can see 'em, do you?"

"Oh no. Not tonight anyway."

Trotter gulped. "Why, man, it'd take us the rest of the summer to gather all these cattle!"

Kent sensed his dismay and, while he didn't understand it, was ready to probe a little deeper into it, when Frances intervened.

"I'm sure Mr. Spangler doesn't want you to do that, Trotter," she said. "He just wants to look around a little this afternoon, and then he's going back to town. Aren't you, Mr. Spangler."

Kent could feel her anxiety, too, and it wasn't so hard to understand. It stirred anew all of his hopes. She really was afraid for him.

Trotter turned to the three men he had ordered to come along. "Spread out and chase some cows down here where he can get a look at 'em," he said. "Over there's a bunch, and up in the timber's some more. See?" He pointed triumphantly. "See 'em, Spangler?"

Kent saw them: His cattle, which had been stolen, and which the thief was trying to sell him. But he couldn't keep his eyes on the cattle, his eyes kept coming back to Frances, and his hopes kept rising, and falling.

There would be one sure way to find out about her. He could again offer her the cattle. If she accepted them, it would be all the sign he needed.

But first he had to get the cattle away from Trotter. And, incidentally, away from her. She had consented for Trotter to steal the cattle, that much was still painfully evident. And so, in trying to get the cattle away from Trotter, Kent would actually be trying to get them away from her. In order to give them back to her!

"Look at that bunch of two-year-olds, Spangler!" Trotter exclaimed. "Did you ever see a finer bunch of beef?"

Kent was looking past the two-year-olds to a cabin in the edge of the woods, near which he saw some horses tied, and a couple of men standing watchfully.

"I don't know much about beef cattle," he said. "Milk cows are more in my line."

"*Milk cows!*" Trotter repeated, as though it were some strange species of animal he had never heard of.

"Yeah, I used to have a couple of milk cows, Bessie and Isobel. Bessie was a fine Guernsey, as friendly a critter as you'd ever find. She liked to have me scratch her head, and she'd stand and lean against me like a dog. These here animals don't look so friendly."

Trotter was gaping. "You had two milk cows in *New York?*"

"New York?" Kent didn't know what to make of this.

Frances came to his rescue in a hurry. "Mr. Spangler hasn't lived in New York all of his life. He used to live in—in Oklahoma. On a farm. That's where he milked Bessie and Isobel."

Trotter glared at her. "You seem to know lots about it."

"Oh, Mr. Spangler has told me all about Isobel and Bessie. He milked them when he was a youngster and he didn't like the job. But when Isobel died—she had milk fever—he felt sad about it, and ran away from home. Went to New York."

Trotter made a rumbling noise. He inspected Kent critically. "Oklahoma, huh? You look more like you come from Oklahoma than New York."

"Well, I'm just a country boy. Always will be. That's the reason I want to get out of New York, get back West. This time, though, I thought I'd buy me a real ranch. I don't want no milk cows!"

Trotter laughed. "We ain't got none. Them's real cows!"

KENT looked over the bunch which had been driven up for his inspection. "What's that brand — a Box KK?"

Trotter said nervously, "Yeah—that's it."

"Is that your brand?"

"Uh—yeah. That's—one of 'em." He was getting on thin ice here. This was a lie that could be easily exposed.

Kent was taking a savage pleasure in watching Trotter squirm, but again Frances intervened. She seemed as nervous as Trotter, himself.

"It's getting late," he said, although the sun was still two hours high. "By the time we get back to the ranch, supper will be ready."

"I'm not very hungry," Kent said. "I was lookin' at that cabin up in the woods. Who lives up there?"

"Nobody!" Trotter said. "That's just an old shack, nothin' in it."

"Looks like there's some horses up there, and a couple of men."

"Oh, that's just some cowhands. Frances is right, I think we'd better be gettin' back to the ranch."

"We've got time to ride up to that shack, haven't we?"

"No, no! Not now," Trotter said. And Frances chimed in, "Some other time, Mr. Spangler. Let's go back now."

Kent was puzzled. His old suspicions were aroused. After all, Frances and Trotter were lined up against him, and he hadn't yet discovered all the details of their scheme. What was in this cabin, and why didn't they want him to see it?

"You two can go back," he said. "I'll look around a little more, if you don't mind."

"But we do mind," Frances cried, and then seemed to realize how queerly that sounded. "We don't want you to go off somewhere and—and get lost. We feel responsible for you, Mr. Spangler."

Kent was again losing faith in her. "I can take care of myself, I reckon," he said slowly.

"Of course you can," she agreed hastily. "But—you don't know your way around very well, yet, and—"

"I'll begin learnin' my way around. If I'm goin' to buy this outfit, I'd like to see what I'm buyin', you know."

Her eyes flashed an angry warning. "All right, if you're bound to go, I'll go with you."

Kent was getting angry now. "I told you I could take care of myself," he said.

"You just think you can, you—you—" she choked. And then she gave him a forced smile. "I don't know why I should object, Mr. Spangler," she said sweetly. "It's your ranch, of course—that is, if you buy it. And you have a perfect right to go wherever you please. Doesn't he, Trotter?"

Trotter got some sort of sign from her and said reluctantly, "Sure."

Kent watched them covertly as they approached the little cabin, and he also watched the two men standing near the cabin. They seemed to be on guard, but they offered no objections as Trotter took the lead and rode forward. He said something to them which didn't reach Kent, and then Frances sang out so everybody could hear, "This is Mr. Spangler! He is looking at the ranch. He may buy it."

Kent saw that the cabin was occupied. He rode up to where he could glance through a window. The first face he saw was that of Jim Sunberry.

And then he knew what he had only

suspected. Here were Jim Sunberry and his men, held prisoners by Trotter's crew.

Sunberry was staring at him in amazement, and he had every right to be amazed, seeing him on apparently friendly terms with Trotter. Kent had to endure his stare, and say nothing.

But Jim Sunberry was getting ready to say something!

Suddenly Kent realized that would mean Sunberry would tear off the mask, and the fireworks would start. Surrounded by Trotter and his men, Kent would have little chance. He would get no help from Sunberry and his crew, of course. There would be no time to make explanations that would convince them of the truth. And even if he could, they were prisoners, unarmed.

"Oh, Mr. Spangler!" called Frances in a shrill voice.

Kent glanced at her warily, and then at Trotter.

"I hope your curiosity is satisfied now, Mr. Spangler," Frances said, riding up close to him, and talking in a voice clearly meant for Sunberry's ears. "These men don't live here, you see. They are just—just some of the men who work on the ranch."

SHE turned directly to Sunberry, then. "This is Mr. Spangler," she said. "He expects to buy the ranch."

Sunberry's face was a study in grim amazement. He stared at the girl, and then his eyes bored into Kent's. Then he nodded, "Howdy, Mr. Spangler.

"This is—Jim Sunberry," Frances said.

"Glad to meet you, Sunberry," said Kent, gravely. Trotter and his guards were watching tensely. "I'll likely be seein' you again—if I buy the ranch," he added.

"Now, are you ready to go back?" Frances asked, weakly.

"I reckon so," Kent agreed. "I'm gettin' hungry, now."

Now he could understand Frances's frantic attempt to keep him from coming here. She knew the danger he was in of being exposed by Sunberry. And only her quick thinking, and quick acting, in the face of his stubbornness had saved him.

There was no question in his mind now that she was doing everything she could to protect him, and get him out of there safely. All the old elation came back to him, and something more than mere hope. He was not the least bit interested in getting away safely. Although he knew he was in imminent danger of being shown up and then of having to face Trotter and his entire crew single-handed, he had no intention of running off.

He told himself that his first duty was to Sunberry and his men. He was responsible for their plight, and he would have to set them free. Then they could help him round up Trotter's gang.

It was evident, however, that Frances was expecting him to accept the opportunity of escape which she had provided for him. He could see that she was in a constant state of panic for fear Trotter would discover his identity, and that every minute he stayed was added anxiety for her. But her anxiety brought exultation to him; her suffering was his joy.

Supper wasn't ready when they got back to the ranch, and it would have been the height of ill manners to expect him to go before he had eaten. For that matter, there was no reason why he shouldn't stay over-night—if he was who he pretended to be. Had he come to look at the ranch, he couldn't have been satisfied with such a brief inspection. Frances was having a hard time paving the way for his departure.

"It's too bad you have to be back in town early in the morning," she said, as they sat on the gallery waiting for

the supper gong. "But if you must go, I suppose you must."

"You ain't goin' back to town tonight, are you?" Trotter asked.

Kent decided that he would leave, and when darkness came, return to the cabin and free Sunberry and his men, if he could slip up on the two guards.

"Guess I'll have to," he said, and saw the immense relief that came to Frances. He added, dryly, "But I'll be back."

Trotter took this as a favorable sign and he was boisterously pleasant at the supper table. Kent found that he was actually hungry and that he could eat as though he had nothing whatever to worry about. Nor was he worrying very much. He was thinking that he had everything his own way and could act in his own good time—when there came a sound of footsteps outside the cookshack and two men appeared at the door.

One of them was a tall dude in a derby hat and fancy riding clothes. The other was Paddy Trimm.

Kent didn't have to wait for introductions to know that this was the man from New York who had come to buy the ranch. He knew it in his heart, in his bones, and in the pit of his stomach.

Kent wasn't hungry any more. He didn't think he could swallow the food in his mouth. He didn't think he could set down the cup of coffee he had raised to his lips, for his arm seemed suddenly paralyzed.

He glanced across the table at Frances, who was staring at the newcomers in dismay. She sat at the right of Trotter, who occupied the head of the table, facing the only outside door to the cookshack. Kent was sitting on his left. Thus he was directly facing Frances, and she would be right in the middle of everything.

It was this paralyzing thought which kept Kent's arm uplifted and his trigger finger locked into the handle of the coffee cup—instead of where it should have been. He knew that he should have his gun rammed in Trotter's side, before Paddy spoke, but Trotter seemed to have sensed the truth, and he was on guard.

"Gentlemen!" Paddy was saying smoothly. "Excuse me! *Ladies* and gentlemen!" He smiled in benignant surprise at Frances. "Permit me to introduce Mr. Spangler!"

THE stunned silence that followed his oily introduction seemed interminable to Kent. He should break it. He should blast it all to hell! He still had some advantage if he acted quickly enough.

But there was Frances, almost touching Trotter's huge right shoulder, right where she would be in the greatest danger.

The oil of Paddy's manner oozed away. His merry little eyes grew sharp and cold. They stabbed at the faces about the table, with a final, fixed, piercing stare at Kent.

"Spangler!" breathed Trotter.

The real Spangler was obviously embarrassed. He didn't know what to make of this kind of reception. His smile weakened into a sickly grin. He lifted his derby and bowed stiffly in the direction of Frances.

Kent understood his embarrassment, in the way a victim dying with stomach ulcers understands the discomfort of a man with the slight pains of indigestion. Kent was really embarrassed.

"Spangler?" Trotter repeated grimly. "And he wants to buy my ranch?"

His discovery of Kent seemed to have dried up all of Paddy's glibness. Spangler said, "Well, I—I came to look it over. Is—is it all right?"

Trotter's lips moved in a half-smile and half-snarl. "I got a man here now that wants to buy the ranch. His name

is Spangler too. That's funny, ain't it?"

He waited. Maybe he was waiting for somebody to laugh at this joke. Spangler accommodated him with a nervous titter. "How odd!" he said.

"That's right, partner. Odd. Maybe this other hombre's name ain't Spangler, at all. Maybe I didn't get it right the first time."

Every word he said was like the loop of a rope, winding around Kent, binding him, strangling him.

"Maybe this other hombre don't want to buy my ranch, at all. Maybe he's just a tinhorn, lookin' for trouble! If he is, he's shore as hell found himself plenty!"

Suddenly, Trotter had some troubles himself. It started with a cup of coffee.

Gripping the handle of the coffee cup with his trigger finger, Kent shot it squarely into Trotter's face. Then he shot his fist. As he leaped across the corner of the table, he shot with the top of his head.

He shot with everything he had except his gun, and hit the mark with everything. The coffee hit Trotter in the eyes, the fist landed on his jaw, the top of Kent's head got him under the chin.

Trotter went backwards off his bench and smashed into the flimsy partition wall that separated the kitchen from the rest of the chuckhouse. Kent right after him, and over him, trying to get behind him so he could use him for protection. He hoped that he could thus prevent any shooting, at least until he could get Frances out of the way.

But he couldn't get behind Trotter. There was really no behind to him. He was inextricably tangled with the splintering wall, his head on the floor and his feet in the air.

The thunder of a forty-five seemed to shake the little building, and it shook to pieces Kent's plan of preventing gun-fire. He must have presented a fairly good but a very active target as he leaped over Trotter and rolled into the corner with him. The bullet sliced along his back and tore at his ear.

Grabbing his gun, he burrowed into a small space between a part of the wall that still stood and the violent tangle of legs and arms that was Trotter. He saw Frances rush toward the man that had shot, and he froze into motionless apprehension.

A flailing boot struck him in the side of the head, as Trotter got his legs to the floor. Groggy, Kent fought his way out of the corner, beating at Trotter's head with his gun.

Again there came a deafening blast, a flash of fire, and the deadly slap of a bullet. This time it missed him, burying itself in the wall by the side of his head. He saw another man with a gun crouched at the far end of the table and took a shot at him. Right back came another slug, as if his own were being returned to him.

From another angle came a vicious volley, three shots fired too rapidly to be coming from the same gun. Trotter yelled and tried to get away. Kent slugged him as he swung his gun to meet the new attack.

AND then he saw Frances lying on the floor. Up till that moment he had been fighting defensively, trying to do as little shooting as possible, thinking if he could only get Trotter in front of him the others would have to stop. He had kept his head; he had been sane.

But all sanity, all careful calculations vanished with the sight of Frances. She lay face down, one arm outflung and the other drawn up with her hand on the back of her head. She was the only thing in that room which was motionless—even the table and the benches and the walls were moving. Everything was trembling with the violence which filled the little room.

She alone was still, quite defenseless, and very small. It wasn't like her to be this way. It was like her to be up and jumping around and taking part in the violence and the noise and the resistance which he had encountered on every hand.

This change in her wrought a change in him, an instant and consuming change. If she were dead, if the life had gone out of her and all the frantic determination that life had given her, it had gone into him. He had her frenzy, her apprehensions, her recklessness. And in addition he had all of his own consummate fury, his stark fear, and his blind devotion to a lost hope.

He fought his way to her, not counting his blows, or aiming his shots. He fired his gun as long as it would shoot, and then he chopped with it. He fired into frenzied faces, he chopped into hideously bleeding heads. He thrust aside flaming guns, seized them and turned them on his enemies.

They were jamming the door in terrified retreat. Kent dropped down beside Frances, crouched over her, trying to see some evidence of life in her. She was as still as the others there on the floor, and they were undoubtedly dead.

There were three of them—one who lay on his back with the top of his head gone, another who was tied in a knot with his hands locked upon his abdomen, and in the far corner was Trotter. He was sitting there with one eye open, staring with it at the thing he had seen when he died. It must have been a terrifying thing, and all of his terror was congealed in that eye and glazed over with death. There was a bullet hole where his other eye had been, and on his face were the bruises and gashes of gun-barrel and fist.

"Frances!"

Kent whispered her name, but it was like a shout in the deserted, corpse-strewn room. Outside there were other shouts, then shooting. But it might have only been an echo of what had happened here, hardly longer than the time it takes a distant echo to return, mockingly.

The rush of feet approaching the door was no echo. Kent knew he must fight again, he knew the mob was coming back. But his hands were empty, and the same emptiness was inside of him. He had nothing to fight with. Where was his gun? He had dropped it somewhere. He searched for it dazedly. It would be empty. He would have to get it loaded—

They were at the door.

Still on his hands and knees, he looked up at them. His groping fingers became rigid and his eyes locked in a puzzled stare.

Instead of Trotter's mob returning, this was Jim Sunberry and his crew.

"Howdy, Mr. Spangler!" Sunberry drawled.

He glanced about the room, stepped slowly inside. "Looks like we got here a little too late. When he heard the shootin' we busted out."

Kent sank back on his heels beside Frances.

"Is she dead?"

Kent shook his head. He touched her hand. It was still warm. He picked her up in his arms and stood holding her. He had never realized how small she was, how easy it would be to hurt her. Very carefully he walked out of the room.

Through the twilight, under a big oak tree, past a sprawling bougainvillea, he carried her. Just to keep moving, just to get her away from everybody else. He could still feel the warmth of her body, and as long as it lasted she was alive, and he wouldn't give her up.

DOWN the hill was a spring, with water running over a rock wall. It looked cool and nice. The sound of

the water pleasantly drowned out the voices around the chuckhouse.

"Where—am I?"

The words were low and so blended with the gurgle of the spring Kent wasn't sure she had spoken. But her lips were moving and her eyes were open.

And, right then, Kent didn't know where he was himself. He thought he must be in heaven.

Only a moment ago he had been in hell. He had walked right out of hell, and maybe he *had* walked into heaven. Frances struggled a little and the spell was broken.

"What happened? Where are you taking me?"

"Where would you like to go?"

She looked at him a little while. "I don't care. Just keep on going."

He felt that he could carry her like this the rest of his life. If he were actually still alive. He doubted it a little.

But she was no doll, to be carried around and gloated over. She was alive and kicking—and questioning. "What happened back there? I guess I got hit on the head. I don't remember anything. You're hurt!" She slipped out of his arms. "You're bleeding!"

The blood was coming from a gash in his shoulder. He had a lot of cuts and bruises and bullet marks, but he never felt better in his life.

There was just one thing troubling him now. "Will you take the cattle back?" he asked.

"The cattle! What does it matter about the cattle now?"

It mattered a great deal to him. It seemed to him that everything depended upon her willingness to take the cattle back. This, he figured, was the real test of her affection.

It was perhaps a peculiar way to test a woman's affections, and a man couldn't expect any woman to get very romantic over a herd of cattle.

She seemed perplexed. "I had no idea you disliked cattle so much."

Dislike cattle? He hated cattle. Why did they have to talk about cattle at a time like this?

"You'gone to a whole lot of trouble, to get and then to give away a herd of cattle," she said.

"That's not it! I—"

"I know. Your conscience is hurting you."

"Not a bit!"

She looked at him wide-eyed. "Then what's hurting you?"

She was hurting him, damn it! "Take 'em or leave 'em," he said. "I've done all I can."

She took them. She took him too. She married him and tried to make a cowman out of him. But she couldn't do it.

After Paddy Trimm left Arapahoe, about twenty minutes before Jim Sunberry and his crowd started cleaning up the town, Kent took over the Beef Stew. Frances objected strongly.

This was in the summer of 1884. Ranges were overstocked, Texas fever was sweeping the country, and barbed wire was putting an end to the open range. The cattle boom and all the frenzied financing connected with it was over.

And when the blizzard of 1886 came, bringing the greatest die-up in the history of the West, Frances admitted Kent had done a smart thing in staying out of the cattle business.

"Nothin' smart about it," Kent admitted candidly. "I just don't like cattle. I spent too much time settin' on a milk stool when I was a kid."

"Milk cows!" Frances snorted. "They're not cattle!"

But Kent maintained obdurately "Cows is cattle, and cattle is cows. I don't want to have anything to do with the critters."

TINHORN TRIGGERS

By
MELVIN W. HOLT

The town wasn't big enough for both of them. Either Danker or Canfield was going to have to holster steel or swallow lead . . .

WHEN the appalling news of Rob Canfield's death finally reached the Bar Y, cowpuncher Cleve Martin promptly took a leave of absence from the ranch and hit the trail for the town of Mescal, more than a hundred miles to the north.

Now, three days later, Cleve was approaching the Mescal boot hill. His somber gray eyes sought out the new grave with Rob Canfield's name burned on the crude headboard. He pulled his bay bronc up beside the grave and dismounted, removing his dust-stained Stetson in a gesture of respect for a lifelong friend.

The heavy silence that shrouded the shady little graveyard was morose and depressing in its effect upon Cleve Martin. After a minute or two the cowboy donned his hat and started to remount, then waited as he saw the gaunt, bewhiskered old man walking up the gulch from the town, carrying a pair of brass-studded cartridge belts and holstered guns in his hands.

The old man studied Cleve appraisingly. Cleve fixed his interest on the two ornate, silver-mounted Colt 45's. How well he knew those guns. They had belonged to Rob Canfield, and Rob's father before him.

"I'm Gabe Jones, stranger," the old-timer said. "I take it you're a pal of Rob Canfield."

Cleve nodded grimly. "Been good friends for a long time, since we were kids. At one time Rob was sheriff of Holman County, down where I hail from. He was plumb four-square. Who gunned him down?"

"Josh Danker. Danker seems to think he owns the whole town of Mescal, and that's why the trouble started. Canfield bought the Bullwhip Saloon about three months ago, and people come to like the way he done business so well that Danker's Broken Spur place was nearly forced to close up from lack of customers. Danker made threats against him, said the town wasn't big enough for both of them. Canfield called his hand by challengin' him to a game of draw poker, the loser to give up his saloon and leave town. Danker's the tinhorn type who'd cheat his own grandmaw, but Canfield outtinhorned him and won the game. He give Danker two days to vacate the Broken Spur, but Danker told him to go to hell. At the end of two days Canfield went callin' on him. Nobody

but Danker and his barkeep in the Broken Spur at the time, so nobody but them knows exactly what happened. Danker says it was a fair drawn-and-shoot. Naturally he would."

"What about the law?" Cleve queried.

"There just ain't any. The county seat's too far away, and the sheriff don't take much interest in Mescal's welfare. Josh Danker hisself is self-appointed town marshal, but his kind of law rides roughshod over decent folks like Canfield and the rest of us. You bein' a friend of Canfield's, maybe you'll be takin' over his saloon. But watch out for Danker."

CLEVE shook his head emphatically. "I didn't come here for any inheritance. Rob's got a brother down in Texas; reckon the property'll belong to him now. Likewise them two six-shooters of Rob's."

He took the silver-mounted guns from Gabe Jones and examined them thoroughly.

"One bullet spent in this one," he mused, turning the cylinder of the right-hand gun.

"Yeah. Reckon Canfield managed to get off one shot before he died. Danker says so. And nobody except me's laid a hand on them guns since Canfield was buried."

Cleve replaced the guns in their holsters and hung them on the horn of his saddle. His deeply tanned face was etched with cold determination as he mounted and reined his horse away from Rob Canfield's last resting place.

"See you later," he told the old-timer. "Right now I'm headin' for the Broken Spur."

The Bar Y puncher rode down the gulch and entered Mescal's main and only street. The day was sultry, and the little town basked sleepily in the sun's shimmering heat. Cleve located Josh Danker's saloon midway down the street. He turned in at the hitch rack and swung to the ground, loosening the big six-shooter in his holster as he crossed the boardwalk and pushed through the batwings.

Inside, he halted momentarily to accustom his eyes to the gloom. A lanky, hawk-faced man sat at a table, facing him. The man was gaudily garbed, and there was an air of mocking insolence about him. Cleve knew instantly that he was looking at Josh Danker. The butt of a Colt .41, snug in an armpit holster, peeped from behind Danker's coat lapel.

The other occupant of the big room was a sallow-faced, flint-eyed little man who stood behind the mahogany bar, his sleeves rolled up and a dirty-white apron about his middle.

Cleve Martin grew tense as a coiled spring, every instinct warning to be careful. Two men—Josh Danker and his barkeep. According to old Gabe Jones, this was the same set-up that Rob Canfield had faced.

"Looking for somebody, cowboy?" Danker's voice was like the harsh rasp of a file, his gaze icy and penetrating.

Cleve answered: "Lookin' for the hombre that sent Rob Canfield across the divide."

Danker stood up, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"You've found him," he snapped. "Maybe you aim to take up where he left off?"

"No 'maybe' about it. Murder's bad business, Danker."

The saloonman's lanky body stiffened under the lash of Cleve's stinging accusation.

"Murder? Who said anything about murder?" he growled. "The late Rob Canfield was just that—*late*. Late by a split second. His slug went into the floor as he fell. You got no cause to be on the prod, stranger. It was a fair

fight."

"I knew Rob for a long time," Cleve said scornfully, "and you must be plenty fast if you shaded him. I'm callin' you a slimy-tongued liar, Danker. Fill your hand and I'll prove it."

Having thus hurled his challenge into Josh Danker's teeth, Cleve settled back on widely spaced feet and waited, fingers toying with the buckle of his gunbelt. Danker's right hand began to move up toward his left armpit—slowly, very slowly. The sallow-faced barkeep stood stockstill, as if hypnotized by the tableau of impending death before him. The oppressive tension in the big barroom was almost unbearable.

Cleve's lips curled sarcastically. "Losin' your nerve, Danker? Damn you, I said *fill your hand!*"

A HINT of dread mingled with the seething anger that flushed Danker's aquiline features. He cursed softly and dropped into the gunfighter's crouch. Then—

Cleve Martin broke into explosive action, his gun snapping up and belching a streamer of orange powder flame as he twisted to one side. But it wasn't Josh Danker who took his first bullet—it was Danker's barkeep. The flint-eyed little man had been in the furtive act of leveling a six-gun at Cleve over the polished bar top. Cleve's slug made a crimson-gushing hole in the center of his forehead, and the man slumped downward.

Shaken by the sudden turn of events, Josh Danker started his draw too late. Cleve's gun swiveled around and thundered again just as Danker flipped the .41 from his armpit. Danker's gun slid from his hand as he wilted to the floor, drilled through the chest.

"You're yellow plumb through Danker," Cleve said coldly to the dying saloon owner. "You didn't kill Rob Canfield. It was your skunky barkeep. You had him pull a sneak on Rob, just like he tried on me. But knowin' there was somethin' fishy about the set-up, I was ready for him. You see, Danker, you made a mistake when you fired a shot from Rob's right-hand gun, after he was dead. You wanted to make it appear that he'd been killed in a fair fight. Rob wasn't really a two-gun man; he packed both guns only because they'd been left to him by his dad, and he thought a lot of them. The trigger finger on Rob's right hand had been broken once, and was too stiff to be useful after that. You didn't know him very well, else you would've savvied that he never used that right-hand gun when he had any fast lead-slinging to do."

The fires of vicious hatred burned brightly in Danker's eyes for a moment, then slowly faded out as he stiffened in the clutch of Death. . . .

BUSHWHACK WARRANT

By PETER DAWSON

It was a fine high-powered weapon, Mike Kilgrew's Winchester, and mebbeso it was meant to kill law-breakers and mebbeso it was meant to kill law-backers!

Gun fire flamed at his back!

TWO HOURS ago he had left Mike Kilgrew's bedside and, after a brief word to the doctor, stepped out into the night's bitter cold. He would never again see Mike alive. Of that he was convinced.

Now, kneeling behind the windfall and peering through the rifle's telescope, he felt the night's scalding fury burn itself out. His blue eyes were as chill as the biting dawn wind that whipped streamers of dry snow up off the face of the rim.

That snow scud momentarily fogged the pattern quartered by the sight's cross hairs. Then he saw clearly a section of the blacksmith-shed wall four hundred yards beyond the ridge and below. The cross hairs targeted the barked slab a good three feet above a line of spur scuffs gouged in the wood, those marks the token of men having

spent many hours idling there.

When Bill Corliss straightened, satisfied finally, his wide chest ached from the past minute of bated breathing. He drew in a deep lungful of air and let it go in a gusty exhalation that was a protest against the feebleness of this ruse. There was Mike Kilgrew's Winchester, tied firmly to the windfall. It was a fine high-powered weapon, it would shoot wherever it was aimed. He knew that. The string from the trigger, with the rock weighing its end, ran over a sturdy branch where a coating of ice held it firmly. When the ice melted, the .30-.30 would fire. He had planned this all carefully, very carefully.

"One slug," he breathed, his tall frame shoulder-hunched to press the sheepskin collar to the back of his neck. He stared bleakly down at the clutter of ranch buildings below the rim. "Just one," he repeated, adding wryly, "Not exactly what Mike would've called a sure thing."

IT didn't surprise him to realize that he was already thinking of Mike as gone. What else could happen. A crushed shoulder, three broken ribs, insides torn loose maybe and a serious concussion. Add to that Mike's age, sixty-four, and there was only one answer. Doc Baldwin had been nice about his diagnosis, but he hadn't fooled the man who had sided Mike the last ten years. Mike was headed over the hill.

Bill Corliss turned then, impatience suddenly strong in him. He threaded his way through a stand of jackpine, gained the crest of the ridge and headed down its far, gently sloping side. Beyond a stunted cedar a hundred yards in, he came up on the gelding, pulled loose the knotted reins and swung into the saddle. He went away at a stiff trot.

With luck, he'd be in Gap in time to catch Ed Southern at breakfast.

"*Sheriff* Ed Southern," he drawled aloud and laughed dryly.

"You'll do it and you'll like it and to hell with your reasons for not wantin' to."

The speaker sat tilted back in a caboose chair, his scarred boots on the deal desk, the small office's only presentable piece of furniture aside from a new hogsback stove, still shiny with its store-polish. He was a big man, all chest and arms, no fat on him. He had the habit of squinting his right eye, giving its stare added emphasis.

The stocky individual half-sitting, half-standing against the window ledge smiled broadly at the discomfiture of the room's third occupant.

The last mentioned, grizzled, moustached and spare-framed, finally dropped his glance, saying mildly, "I didn't mind your pullin' me out of bed an hour early, Hurd. But you can't ask any man to do this to a friend." He shrugged, pushing a pair of spectacles from his high-bridged nose to his forehead, adding, "Not even me."

"No one's askin'. You're bein' told, Sheriff."

The man at the window laughed softly, the sound of his voice breaking off at a quick sharp glance from Hurd. Instantly, Sheriff Ed Southern's thin face hardened at the insult, a new expression wiping out the look that had made him appear a weak and undecided old man.

"Or would you rather it got out how many voters we hired off the railroad payroll lists across at Newton last election?" Sid Hurd asked, his squint more pronounced now.

The meaning behind his words killed the bright spark of Ed Southern's pride and he said humbly, "Let's have it again, all of it."

"You're to ride out to Corliss's layout this morning. You're to serve a warrant on him for tearin' down a

quarter-mile of my four-strand fence and runnin' the tallow off a hundred head of my wintered beef. You're to come back with him and lock him up." Sid Hurd nodded to the man at the window. "Shad'll go with you—in case you need help. Mike Kilgrew might try somethin' rash."

THE sheriff's glance left Hurd and went to the window, unthinkingly, automatically, as he gave way to the long ingrained habit of observing anything happening on the street. A moment ago he'd caught the faint drum of hooves against the frozen and rutted ground far out toward the edge of town.

When the rider came into sight a hundred yards below, the law man's eyes showed sudden interest. He removed his spectacles and began polishing them with a bandana as he drawled drily, "At least I'm saved the ride. Here's Corliss now." He laid his glasses on his desk beyond Hurd.

His words had a surprising effect on the other two. Shad wheeled quickly erect and away from the window, facing it, his right hand dipping involuntarily to sweep back his canvas coat from his thigh. Sid Hurd's boots came down off the desk, one spur gouging the varnished wood. He came to his feet at once, speaking a rush of clipped hard words:

"Stay set, Shad! You've reported all this to the sheriff. If Corliss asks for anything, let him have it. That's why I hired you."

His glance swung to the law man. "Play yours cards right this time, Ed, and you'll never have another worry your whole life. Play 'em wrong and—and you won't have any more worries either."

With that, he stepped around the desk, palmed the knob on the alley door and was gone.

Shad nodded curtly to the door. "Get Corliss in here."

He had been a nonentity a moment ago, a hireling, almost menial in his actions before Hurd. Now he shed that manner and his voice was gruff, commanding, as he stepped rearward and stood spraddle-legged before the hot stove.

Ed Southern went to the door, opened it and stepped outside in time to hail, "Bill!" as the man on the street came abreast him.

Bill Corliss swung in to the rail, coming aground as the gelding halted. He knotted the reins swiftly, surely, ducked under the rail and crossed the walk drawling, "This is a help. Grab your coat, Sheriff, and get your hull on a horse. Got a job for you."

Ed Southern's brows lifted in a wry grimace; but his answer showed little interest in the news Bill Corliss was giving him. Something else prompted his expression. "You used to call me Ed," he drawled.

"That was when Mike and me knew which side of the fence you stood on," was Bill Corliss's clipped answer.

His words held a deep meaning for the law man. Southern gave that same helpless shrug of a few minutes ago in Hurd's presence. He avoided Bill's glance and without answering stepped in through the door and aside.

Bill's tall shape was well through the opening before he saw Shad and the gun in Shad's hand. He stopped, all expression draining from his lean face. He looked at the sheriff and Southern said in a tight hoarse voice,

"Bill, I reckon you're under arrest. For pullin' down Hurd's fence and tryin' to run off his cattle."

Bill's glance was on Shad now, enigmatic, cold. He drawled tonelessly, "I wondered how Hurd would play this to hang it on me."

Shad tilted his head briefly. "Get his iron, Sheriff."

BILL caught Ed Southern's almost inaudible sigh as the law man came in, pulled the sheepskin aside and lifted the .45 from his holster. There was a moment when all three stood motionless, as though waiting for some unexplained violence to break out.

Bill Corliss finally broke the silence by saying, "Well, that's that. Warm in here, isn't it?"

He half turned from Shad, whose gun now dropped deftly into the leather at his thigh. Bill opened the sheepskin and deliberately pulled it off.

Shad saw the beginning of the move, the arcing out of the coat. His hand slashed toward his holster in a frantic swift stab. But Bill had thrown the weight of shoulder and arm behind the heavy sheep-lined canvas. Only ten feet separated him from Shad; and a lunging stride used up half that distance.

The coat caught Shad across the face, its vicious swing spinning him halfway around. His Colt's blasted out, lining a stab of flame toward the window, where a pane of glass shattered and jangled out and down onto the board walk beyond. Then, suddenly, Shad lost his balance and fell back across the flat searing-hot surface of the hogsback stove. His scream was high-pitched, awful.

Bill had a hold on him an instant later, gathering his shirt-front in his left hand and hauling the Hurd man to his feet, away from the stove. His right fist jabbed up with seeming effortlessness. Shad's head rocked far back and his frame went limp. Bill let him fall, wrenching the .45 from his hand. Shad sprawled face down, inert and unconscious, the room utterly still now as Bill faced the sheriff, Shad's gun levelled.

Ed Southern hadn't moved during these brief seconds, although his eyes were wide and staring in disbelief. It took Bill but a moment to note that the law man had made no attempt to reach for the weapon he wore belted high at the left side of his waist, butt-foremost.

Bill lowered the .45, saying easily, "You had a chance there, Sheriff. Why didn't you take it?"

The law man seemed to ponder this but finally said noncommitally, "I heard Shad's story. Now I want yours."

"What story?"

"Some fence came down between your place and Hurd's last night. Some tallow was run off some of Hurd's critters. Who pushed 'em?"

"Ed," Bill said soberly, forgetting his resolve to address the law man formally, "Mike was murdered last night. Or the same as murdered."

Ed Southern's tanned face blanched. "Mike? Dead?"

"Probably by now he is. He was tryin' to swing the point of a stampede. Someone shot his horse from under him and he was trampled. I'd pushed the critters back through the break in Hurd's fence before I began worryin' too much about him. Went back and found him layin' there half froze. I got him home."

Ed Southern swallowed with difficulty. "Then he isn't dead yet?"

Bill shrugged irritably. "I said he probably is. Along about three this mornin' I remembered that Doc Baldwin goes out each Thursday night to see the little Wallace girl. So I rode hell for leather across there and brought Doc back."

"What did he say? Hasn't Mike a chance?"

BILL shook his head. "It was what the sawbones didn't say that meant the most. Mike's busted up bad. The worst is a concussion. He'll probably never come to."

The law man stared stonily, not at

Bill but at nothing, so deep and awful were his thoughts. Bill had so tormented himself these past hours with his pent up feelings that now he went on, speaking a rush of quick hard words:

"We heard 'em comin' while they were still a good mile away. Wind was just right or they'd have been on us before we could pile out of bed. O' course, Hurd wanted to drive right through our layout, smashin' up the cabin and corrals and sheds before we knew what hit." Bill paused, getting a hold on his voice. Then: "We turned 'em up that draw to the east. I heard shots but didn't know what had happened until later, like I told you. I found Mike's paint mare with a bullet through her heart."

Now Ed Southern's eyes were moist, bright with a touch of the same hate that had lighted Bill's up there on the rim an hour ago. The sheriff turned away, sat down at his desk. "Did—had Mike been feeling the same about me lately, Bill?"

A twisted smile touched Bill's face. "Just the same," he drawled, "only moreso. He wouldn't have pulled you out of a well if you were drownin'. He wouldn't have—" He stopped abruptly before the violence of his anger.

"It would've been nice if Mike and me had made our peace before he cashed in," the law man said humbly, staring down at his desk.

An uncomfortable silence followed—uncomfortable, at least, for the sheriff—in which Bill came across to the desk and picked up his gun, which Southern had laid there. He holstered it.

He said, "Here's your chance to make it up to a lot of people. I'll swear out a warrant on Hurd. Come out with me and arrest him. Make him stand trial for this. It's a cinch he didn't have murder in mind when he tried what he did last night."

Ed Southern looked up, helpless abject. "I can't, Bill. You know that."

"Why not? Because Hurd bought your election for you?"

"I didn't know about Hurd then. The way he put it up to me, the railroad was backing this Morrison from Newtown to hog the cattle market in this country."

"And after the election, Morrison simply disappeared. He was Hurd's understrapper," Bill reminded him. "All those votes that were going to Morrison came to you. You agreed to let Hurd buy votes for you because he'd convinced you you didn't have a chance otherwise.

"You were his man by that time. Now it turns out that he's the hog. He's run two outfits out of the country already. He's tryin' to run me out because I have a few steers to sell for the fancy prices the railroad's payin'. And all you can do is back his play."

The law man stared up, humiliation in his glance. "That's the story," he said. "What should I do about it?"

"Go out with me to Hurd's now. Arrest him. Have him stand trial for bushwhackin' Mike."

"How far do you think we'd get? He's hired guns, plenty of them. If he'd kill Mike, he'd take care of us. He'd make it look like an accident, then put in his own law. No one can go in there on a job like you want and come out alive."

"I'll go in. Maybe I'll come out alive," Bill stated.

THE sheriff was looking out of the window and, abruptly, came up from his chair and went to the door. Turning as the door opened, Bill could see several men standing across the street, peering at the office warily. They had heard the shot.

Ed Southern called across to them, "Just an accident, boys. Bill Corliss was showin' me a new iron. The damn'

thing went off. Hair-trigger. We're fixin' it now."

He exchanged a few more words with them, nicely satisfying their curiosity over the shot. He then closed the door and came back to the desk. "Maybe you will, is right," he said, taking up the conversation where he had broken it off. In sudden exasperation, he protested, "Why fight him, Bill? Sell out, leave the country! What you're doin' isn't worth the gamble."

A look of loathing crossed Bill's face. "There was a day when you'd have fought anyone who said a word against Mike, let alone killed him."

"But the odds, Bill! You can't fight odds like Hurd has against you."

"I can. And I will." An unamused smile touched Bill's angular features. "See if you can figure this one out, Sheriff. I'm goin' out to see Hurd. And he'll either come in with me or he'll die. And it'll be Mike that cuts him down. That new rifle of Mike's, remember it? He paid a hundred bucks for the thing with that telescope. We all wondered why. Well, today you'll find out. That rifle's up on the rim. With Mike behind it, I hope."

"You said Mike was most likely dead by now."

"He is."

"Then how can he be up on the rim with that duded-up Winchester?"

"That's something for you to figure out, Sheriff," Bill said. He looked down at Shad. "Wish I'd hit him harder," he drawled, and left. Ed Southern started to the door to call him back, finally turned to the desk and slumped wearily in his chair.

The sheriff listened to the gelding's hoof mutter going out the street, wondering if Bill Corliss had lost his mind.

Some ten minutes later, after he'd had the chance to think it through, Ed Southern was a decidedly more sober and worried man. Yes, Bill Corliss was in his right mind.

The law man was very careful in his preparations, although he completely ignored Shad lying on the floor. He was impatient at having to keep his horse down to a trot when he left town. He didn't want any curiosity aroused over his errand. Then, half a mile out the north trail, he put caution aside and spurred the animal to a hard run, wondering if he'd be in time to save Bill Corliss.

II

Beyond the mesa, where the trail lined across the flat toward the north-facing rim that flanked Hurd's place, Bill rode into strong warming sunlight. The wind, brisk at dawn, had died now and the temperature was rising fast.

All this fit nicely with his plan. The weather had been the same yesterday and the day before. He remembered well—had remembered last night—how the coating of ice along the edge of the water trough had begun thawing just a few minutes short of nine o'clock these last two days. Which, he reasoned, meant that the string easing the drag of the rock on the trigger of Mike Kilgrew's rifle would be free of its thin ice-lock shortly past nine. Before than, he must set the stage carefully. It was to be a gamble at best.

BUT as the miles dropped behind the alternately trotting and running gelding, a frown gradually lined Bill's face. His eye was on the high puffy clouds to the east, watching their swift multiplying. He knew this country and its skies well enough to realize that a man could never be sure—a sky could be cloudless one minute, entirely filmed over half an hour later. He didn't like what he saw now. For everything de-

pended on the sun staying out.

He came to a sparse stand of timber, the trail lifting and the rim close on his right. He crossed a sandy wash and, climbing its far steep side where buckboard wheels had churned the gravelly soil, he could see Hurd's fence ahead. He had dismounted and, reins looped over his left arm, was opening the gate alongside the wide cattle-guard when a man cradling a carbine over one arm stepped from behind a nearby jackpine to drawl in mock unconcern,

"Damned if it ain't Corliss! Come in, neighbor." His thin smile held as Bill went rigid at the sound of his voice. But when Bill's glance settled on him unwaveringly, his geniality disappeared and he said curtly, "But shed the hardware first."

With his weapon, he motioned Bill to turn around. Then, warily, he came in and jerked the six-gun from Bill's holster, stepping quickly clear. "You're too late for breakfast, but we'll go on in anyway."

He made Bill stand in the trail while he disappeared behind a scrub-oak thicket to get his horse. Then, mounted, he signalled Bill to lead the way. "Just take it easy and we'll stay friends," he drawled.

They had gone on a quarter mile before either spoke. It was Bill who said, "You look tired, Reagan. Like you hadn't slept much last night." He turned in the saddle as he spoke.

For an instant, the Hurd rider's tired square-jawed face showed surprise. Then it masked over. "Me? Sleepy?" Reagon asked in a fair pretense of astonishment. "Hell, I came close to sleepin' the clock around.

"It must've taken all your crew to handle that job—to cut the fence at the right time and push those critters through," Bill went on.

"You gone loco?" Reagan asked solemnly. "What critters?"

It was pointless, Bill saw now, to pursue the argument. He needed no information from Reagan. So far as he was concerned, this man was a nonentity.

He forgot Reagan, concentrating on what he was to say to Sid Hurd, trying to will himself into the frame of mind he must have if he was to succeed. He must remember to hold his temper, to take insults, to touch Hurd's weaknesses. The man had few; but Bill knew what those few were.

He was so centered upon his imagining of what was to take place that they had reached the pasture fence, less than a quarter of a mile from the ranch buildings, before he became aware that the layout was even within sight. Those last five minutes passed swiftly and soon they were trotting in past the big corral, Reagan calling a summons.

SID HURD was the second man to step out through the wide door of the bunkhouse. He stood there towering a full head over the men who joined him, his big fists knotted and on hips, his boots spread in a rocklike stance. He was eyeing Bill in that half squint, seriously, as the two riders drew rein close by.

"Look what I drug in, Boss," Reagan said.

Hurd gave no sign that he had heard. "Light, Corliss," he said, politely enough. "Suds still has the coffee on if you feel like some."

Bill swung down out of the saddle stiffly. "No coffee. All I want is talk, Hurd. You and me alone." He remembered something then, and glanced briefly skyward.

What he saw, a gray flat bank of clouds climbing in the east, laid a sudden urgency through him. But that was only momentary. He couldn't hurry the sun—or the clock. He had time, too much time now, before the sun could

thaw the ice that held the trigger-rock suspended far above on the rim. And the swift gathering of those clouds laid a cold hand on his hopes.

Hurd was shrugging his massive shoulders. He glanced at Reagan and Reagan said, "I de-horned him, Boss. Nothin' to worry about."

Hurd nodded to his men lined out a step or two behind him. "Clear out," he said.

"Not here," Bill put in. He looked about, taking in the expansiveness and the signs of affluence about this place, which he hadn't visited this closely since Hurd had moved in. The bunkhouse was of log, the barn new and with a high rock foundation; and the corral he had ridden past was the sturdiest and largest he had ever seen.

"Not here," he repeated, pretending to look about for a place where they could have more privacy. "Over there." He nodded to the blacksmith shed, adding, "It'll be warmer there, too."

"Suit yourself," Hurd said, and led the way.

Crossing to the blacksmith's shed, Bill was aware of two things. Of the cloud-bank that seemed to have mounted higher even since his glimpse of it only moments ago. And of Hurd's crew standing watching his back. He knew now that nothing but luck would see him through this.

Hurd paused at the near corner of the shed and faced him, saying bluntly, "Let's have it."

Bill sauntered on past the rancher to a point midway the length of the wall. There he hunkered down with his back to the slab siding, took a sack of tobacco from the pocket of his shirt and began building a smoke.

"You made me an offer last week, Hurd," he said easily. "I turned you down. What would you say if you found out I'd changed my mind?"

Hurd's expression softened. He now appeared almost genial, the hint of a smile touching his coarse features. He advanced two strides along the wall, leaned against it with his left shoulder. He was almost exactly in line with the point Bill had sighted from the rim at dawn, and Bill stiffened at seeing that.

"Now you're talkin', friend," the big man said. "Thought you might see it my way. But why you changin' your mind?" He asked the question blandly, arrogantly.

BILL'S reply was equally as off-hand. "Mike and me talked it over this mornin', early. We decided we could use the money."

Hurd nodded. And now he was grinning openly. In a sudden burst of honesty, he said, "Reckon I sort of crowded you, Corliss. But this is my game, not yours."

"You figure to make a killin' with high prices this spring?"

"Why not?" Hurd didn't even hesitate in making this open confession of intentions. "Let those Big Augurs back East who clip the railroad coupons foot the bill. They won't know the difference."

"What'll you do if the railroad decides to ship in its own beef?" Bill queried.

"They load some of them cars pretty heavy," Hurd said. "Say there was a weak rail or two. A trainload of cattle would make a sweet mess all piled up with a bunch of busted boxcars." He laughed softly, meaningfully.

But then he sobered, adding, "Understand, this is between just you and me. If you ever told anyone I said this, I'd call you a liar.'"

"Sure," Bill nodded. "Sure."

For a few seconds, neither spoke. It was Hurd who said finally, "You say you and Mike talked it over this mornin'? How is Mike?" The question was a shade too casual.

"So-so. One of your gunsels plugged his jughead from under him in that stampede last night and Mike grew some grey hair leggin' it out of the way."

Hurd appeared on the point of saying something, didn't. What that something was, Bill could easily guess. He was sure that Hurd was making a mental note of questioning his crew more thoroughly about what had happened last night.

"Now to get down to cases," Hurd said abruptly. "You're satisfied with the price?"

Bill took his time answering, glancing back up to the bunkhouse. All but two of the crew had disappeared. These two were widely separated, one less than fifty yards away and leaning against the tie-rail on the near side of the barn, making the pretense of watching something beyond the building. The other, sitting the top pole of the big coral at the head of the trail, made no pretense. His eye was on Bill and Bill's horse was tied to the corral's double corner-post, a few strides away.

Far down the trail near the timber's edge Bill saw a rider running in at a high lope toward the layout. A brief sense of warning touched him, yet he didn't let this show as he answered Hurd, anxious to get another point or two settled before any interruption.

"Satisfied with your price?" He laughed softly. "No, far from it. But we beggars can't be choosers. You said in cash, didn't you?"

"In cash. You can either take your critters out with you or take nineteen a head for 'em. Doesn't matter."

"What if I drive my herd across to the railroad and sell there for thirty a head?"

HURD shook his head. "Wouldn't try if I was you. It's a four-day drive and lots of things could happen to you in them four days. Why take a chance?"

Here it was, the final threat. Although Bill stiffened under a wave of anger, he realized there was nothing he could do. Hurd would do exactly as he had hinted, go to any lengths to keep Bill from selling his beef to the railroad —either now or later. And the law, such as it was, seemed to be on Hurd's side.

Bill shrugged, glanced skyward once more. What he saw shouldn't have hit him as hard as it did. But his pulse slowed as he saw the gray film of cloud already dulling the brilliance of the sun. The heavier cloud was climbing surely, certainly. And Bill could already feel the chill creeping in over the warmth in the air.

In his disappointment and foreboding of disaster, he was hardly aware of the increasing hoof-pound of the horse racing in along the trail. Hurd caught it and turned, muttering in barely audible tones, "Now what the hell's eatin' Shad? God A'Mighty, he's hard on horse flesh!"

Some minutes ago it might have mattered to Bill that Shad should interrupt them at what he supposed would be a critical moment. But it no longer mattered. Nothing that Shad could say, or do, would change the fact that he stood here unarmed and robbed of even the meager advantage he had so carefully planned out. He was licked. Now he would be fortunate if Hurd didn't back down on the pitifully small offer he had made for the ranch. It was certain that the man could do as he chose, simply step in and take the layout if he wanted.

Riding past the guard at the trail head, Shad shouted, wanting to know where to find Hurd. The crewman waved to the blacksmith shed and Shad, spying Hurd and Bill, rode across with a down-lipped sneer gathering on his face.

He drew rein close by, a few feet

out from the wall corner. His glance held Bill a moment. Then he said, acidly, "Fella, I'm goin' to take you apart! Here and now!"

"Why?" Hurd asked.

Shad told him what had happened at the sheriff's office, ending by saying, "And they thought I was out cold while they talked. They forgot how bad I'd been burned. That's what brought me." His face did show pain, Bill saw. "Corliss bragged on how he was comin' in here and bringin' you back. Slappin' you in jail to answer to a murder charge!" Shad ended with a burst of raucous mocking laughter as Hurd's hard glance settled on Bill.

"That wasn't the tune you played me, Corliss," Hurd drawled after a prolonged inspection.

Bill said nothing.

Hurd spoke again. "So Mike's dead after all." His stare was intent, strangely malicious as he added, "Maybe I've been a sucker to take it so easy with you."

"How about it, Boss?" Shad cut in. "Do I have a chance at him?"

Hurd thought a moment, moved his massive shoulders in a barely perceptible lift, all the while eyeing Bill. "Why not?" he said. "Sure, go ahead, Shad."

SWINGING down from the saddle, Shad breathed, "Maybe you should've paid more attention to Ed Southern tellin' you not to come in here, neighbor." He unbelted his holster after flinging aside his windbreaker, and handed the belt to Hurd.

"Where is Southern?" Hurd asked.

"Out somewhere. He didn't tell me. I was still layin' there playin' possum when he left." With a sudden swift lunge, Shad came in at Bill.

Half surprised, Bill tried to dodge Shad's looping right. But it caught him on the shoulder, jarring him back against the wall. And before he could regain his balance and sidestep, Shad had hit him again, this time full on the side of the jaw.

Stunned, Bill went to his knees. He took one more blow on the head before he lunged out, awkwardly, his boots braced against the wall. His shoulder caught Shad in the knees, bringing the man down. Bill's head cleared then and he had the sense and quickness to roll free of Shad's swinging boots and their sharp-rowelled spurs.

Both men were on their feet the same instant, Shad lunging in again. This time Bill nimbly sidestepped, feinted nicely with his left and ripped his right in through the other's guard. He caught Shad in the chest with such a hard blow that his shoulder muscles ached momentarily. Shad coughed, lurched back. Bill followed the blow with a left, which the Hurd man managed to block. But a split-second later Bill's right uppercut caught him on the point of the chin, tilting his head far back.

For a moment it seemed that Shad would fall. Somehow, he managed to close with Bill and get inside the next two punches. Bill realized his disadvantage not an instant too soon and twisted free of the man's powerful arms. Wheeling, he threw a long looping right just as Shad straightened from his off-balance stagger.

Bill felt a lancing of pain as his right fist caught Shad at the side of the face. He heard the pulpy crunch of bone as the man's nose was flattened under the blow. Then, mercilessly, he threw three more blows at Shad, whose eyes had already taken on a vacant stare. The sheer power of those blows was all that held Shad erect. When his weight finally took him forward and down, his face was scarred and bleeding and unrecognizable.

Standing with boots wide apart and dragging in deep lungfuls of air as Shad rolled onto his back, Bill felt a fierce

momentary triumph. But that was soon gone as he remembered. Remembered where he was, remembered Mike and last night and that he was still completely at Hurd's mercy.

He turned slowly to face the rancher. Hurd stood there, his expression as solid and relaxed as his big frame. He held Shad's gun in his right hand, the weapon hanging carelessly at full arm-length.

"You've got a fair punch there, Corliss," Hurd drawled. There was a peculiar calculating glint in his eye. "I could use a man like you," he went on, nodding down to Shad, "now that he's taken the fall. He'll never be able to rod this bunch of lobos now that this's happened. I paid him a hundred and a quarter, good wages. I'll add another fifty to that if you want the job."

Bill shook his head, looking away and wiping his face with his bandana.

"You're sure?" Hurd asked.

"Plenty."

"Then it'll have to be this."

THE intensity of Hurd's words brought Bill's glance whipping around to him. Shad's big forty-five, looking small in the rancher's hand, was now levelled at Bill.

There was no question or doubt in Bill's mind. Hurd meant to kill him. And, as if to add a final overwhelming weight to crush out Bill's last hope, he felt a bitter cold gust sweep the yard that was drab-looking now under a steadily graying sky. Tomorrow, if there was sunlight, Mike's rifle might send that slug into the slab siding of the shed. But not today. And, as far as Bill was concerned, never.

The seconds seemed to drag now, to become minutes, as Hurd's steady glance held. Finally, Bill could restrain himself no longer. "You wouldn't do this even to a crippled rattler," he said. "Get it over with."

Hurd's thumb started slowly drawing back the hammer of the Colt's.

Suddenly, violently, Hurd lurched backward. The sharp *Crack!* of the distant rifle from the rim came a full second later. It was the sound, and that alone, that jerked Bill from his unbelieving bewilderment.

Hurd's gun-arm had fallen as he lurched halfway around. Now, Bill diving in at him, the arm swung back. Bill's down-slashing hand struck the weapon at the exact instant it stabbed its flame and thunder. Bill felt the impact of air from the explosion against his face as he and Hurd went down together. With a second savage side-of-the-hand blow, he struck the rancher across the wrist as they lay there. The Colt's spun from Hurd's grasp and Bill, rolling free and lightly to his feet, swept it up with one deft motion.

Sprawled at Bill's feet, amazed, pain etched upon his face, Hurd's good hand went to his thigh where a dark splotch of blood already showed against the denin of his waist-overalls.

But Bill barely noticed that the man was wounded as he said sharply, "On your feet." For, running down from the bunkhouse, came four of Hurd's crew.

Hurd didn't move. Deliberately, the Colt's at his hip, Bill thumbed back the hammer and squeezed the trigger. As his arm eased up with the explosion of the six-gun, a piece of bark flew from the slab near Hurd's head, stinging the rancher in the ear. Only then did the big man move, rolling over and coming slowly erect.

"Tell 'em to get back!" Bill said, stepping in behind Hurd.

Hurd's call, warning his men to stay clear, was hardly necessary. For the crew, sizing up the situation, had already halted and were standing grouped some thirty feet away.

Bill called, "Spread out and shed the irons, gents. This party's over."

When they hesitated, he added, "Mike Kilgrew's up there on the rim lookin' down at one of you through that telescope. He did a fair job on Hurd here, considerin' that I warned him I wanted to bring Hurd in alive."

He had difficulty keeping a straight face, and keeping down his elation as he saw the eyes of every crewman go quickly to the rim.

"When I shoot, Mike shoots." Bill lifted the Colt's above his shoulder and thumbed back the hammer so that all could see. Hands went gingerly to holsters now, slowly lifting guns clear and dropping them to the ground.

WHEN the last weapon lay at the feet of its owner, Bill said, "We'll ride double a ways, Hurd. You first." He nodded to Shad's horse.

Hurd had obviously lost heart. Nothing in his experience matched the suddenness of this overwhelming reversal. The shock of the wound in his thigh was beginning to tell on him. Fear, quite foreign to his nature, unsettled him so that all at once he blurted out, shouting loudly,

"Baker, for God's sake, don't shoot! They'll kill me!"

Bill, not understanding, and sickened at the sight of the big man so completely afraid, was shortly amazed to see a man emerge from the bunkhouse and lean a rifle against the wall. Even at this distance, Bill could catch the disgust written on that man's face.

So Hurd had lost his last chance, this being the one remaining crew member who hadn't surrendered his gun but had chosen to remain in hiding, waiting for a chance to cut Bill down as he tried to get away. Now no obstacle remained to Bill's leaving.

He mounted Shad's horse behind Hurd and at the corral ordered the guard there, gunless now, to go back with his own horse and rope the unconscious Shad on behind the saddle. When the man led his horse and its burden back again, he made Hurd mount the animal and lead the way out the trail. As he followed, he kept a wary eye behind him until he was out of rifle range and approaching the timber.

Ed Southern called, "The sooner you quiet down, the quicker we get you the sawbones, Hurd." He kicked shut the cell door, locked it and came back into the office as Hurd's groans began again.

"First off, there's somethin' you ought to know, Bill," he said as he took his chair. "Doc Baldwin rode in about twenty minutes ago, pretty tuckered out. Mike, he says, is goin' to get well."

Bill could only stare, lost for words.

"Seems like Mrs. Wallace got worried after Doc had left her place last night and had her man hitch up her team. She rode over to your layout and is takin' care of Mike now."

"Doc's sure about Mike?" Bill asked hoarsely.

"Hell, yes, he's sure! He got Mike's shoulder set and strapped into place with stickin' plaster before the old fool ever come to. Saved Mike a lot o' pain I guess." Tilting farther back in his chair, the law man pushed his spectacles up onto his forehead and said, "Now tell me how you pulled this off all on your own, Bill."

"A shot came from the rim right when I needed it."

Southern let out a sigh of exasperation. "How, when Mike was so bad crippled, could he be up there on the rim? Your talk don't make sense, friend."

FOR a moment, Bill didn't answer, his speculative glance so pointedly on the sheriff that Southern looked away. "Y' know, Ed," he said finally, "the one thing I can't figure is how,

when you're so damned blind you need specs even for readin' the big print on a reward dodger, you could see through that telescope to sight that Winchester."

"Didn't use the damn' thing . . ." Ed Southern cut short his clipped protesting words.

His glance held Bill's a long moment; and he reddened when Bill's face shaped a wide grin.

"Thanks, Ed," Bill said softly. "That was one sweet shot."

Ed's mock-severity vanished. He laughed softly and looked a trifle embarrassed. "Wasn't bad, was it?" But then he remembered something and his jaw line hardened. "Like hell I'm blind as a bat!" he growled. "I c'n see from here to yonder end of the street and count the slats on the front window of Sizer's house. It's the close work that gets me."

Bill nodded. "Okay, I take back what I said." It was nice to see Ed as he remembered him best, testy, a chip on his shoulder.

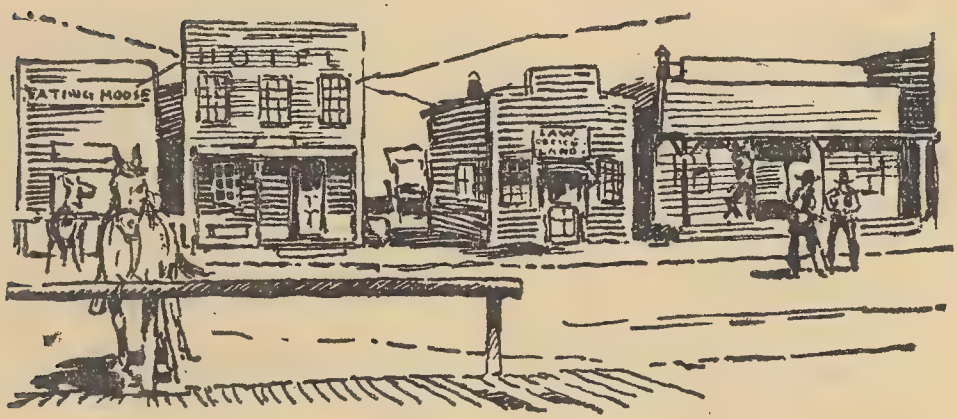
"Now you better get out and let me be," the law man growled, turning to his desk and putting on his spectacles. Abruptly, he looked up.

"Reckon if I come out in a couple days Mike'd let me in your place?" he asked, suddenly.

"Let you in!" Bill said. "He'll sure be in to skin you alive soon as he's well if you don't come out."

"Then lay another plate Saturday night. And," the old sheriff added, "on your way out the street, tell Doc Baldwin to stop in when it's convenient. No hurry, o' course."

He smiled widely at hearing Hurd shout something unintelligible from beyond the cell's heavy door. "No hurry at all," he added.



SIX-GUN CITIZENS FOR SATAN'S WILD-TOWN

By GEORGE JENSEN

A kid went along learning to ride, learning to herd cattle, learning how to fight, and learning, mainly, how to shoot—for there'd come a day when a kid would be bucking not mavericks and broncos but a whole kill-crazy range!

THE kid had nothing much on his mind. He stood in front of the emporium window for a long time, with the half smile on his face. He must have looked at every object in the window five times. He flipped a big coin once or twice and did not seem to watch it when he caught it as it fell back into his palm.

He already had a big package under his left arm when he finally went into the store. He had the package and also a fat bundle hanging by the string from one long finger when he came out again. The smile had a look of being a permanent part of his natural expression.

He moved along the boardwalk toward the end hitchrack where he'd left his horse. His stride was easy and free, his stetson was folded backwards and forwards to top off his tall, lanky figure; his gun-belt hung very loose on one side on the hip, hung the worn holster far back on his flank. The butt of a gun that was either very old or used a great deal.

Down at the end of the street the thing was happening again. The new little guy in town was up on the veranda of the saloon again trying to talk, and the stuff was flying at him again. Mostly only mee-ows and "why don't yuh go back where yuh came from" cracks this time, but also however an occasional hunk of something.

What kind of a New West would we have if we didn't begin right at the beginning by building it on decent principles, the little guy was always asking. And what were we going to do about the way it was here in Simpson —fight, now, for justice and equality for all citizens of the town; or stand by and watch three or four citizens take over the whole range and make slaves of the other citizens?

Right now, under their very noses, the little guy was shouting, these three or four citizens owned the bank, the newspaper, the store, the hotel, and—worst of all—even the law! *What are we little fellows going to do about it?*

"Listen, *little fellow*—" the sheriff's booming voice could be heard, though he was talking low like he usually did, the length of the main street"—what *you're* going tuh do about it is shut up —and *pronto.*"

"Throw 'im in jail!" the yells came; a crowd had gathered in front of the saloon, and the batwings were pushed open with men coming out. "Ride 'im outa town on a cayuse!" "String 'im up on th' cottonwood an' be done with 'im!"

He was a wiry gent, the half-pint speech-maker, more likely in his sixties than in his forties, though you'd never have known for sure seeing his whang-leather features and his sandy hair not even gray on the edges and his fiery grey eyes. He'd been around Simpson for about six months now, and he'd quickly gained the brand of "th' loco little sky-pilot." For at first they'd taken him as a preacher; he did a lot of talking from the start;; and he sent in pieces every day to the *Clarion,* none of which were ever printed. And at

first they'd laughed him off, kidded him, prodded him, played crude jokes on him.

But the "loco" little gent had begun to sound not so very loco after those first weeks. He'd begun to make speeches wherever he could get an audience, and he'd begun to name names, and he'd begun to say things that made certain citizens squirm who weren't at all used to squirming.

And the *Clarion* had begun to take shots at him in editorials; had finally hinted at mebbeso the citizens of Simpson should ride a certain one of their number out on a rail one of these nights; mebbeso a tar-and-feather party for a certain citizen of Simpson wouldn't be untimely.

And the sheriff had suddenly given the little gent serious warning: either he was going to shut up or he was going to find another town to live in.

BUT the little gent had completely ignored all threats. He'd shouted the louder. That's what he was doing this day: shouting, *So now they want to kill freedom of speech in Simpson!*

"They don't like to hear the truth, Simpson's four *leading* citizens don't," he shouted. "Mister *Shadlow* and Mister *Berryman* and Mister *Crandall* and Mister *Wheeler*—they want to run the town and the range unchallenged; an' they ain't satisfied to own jest the town and the range, folks—they want to own *you and me!*"

A rotten cabbage took the little gent beside the face at that moment. It was a big cabbage and the man who'd thrown it had thrown it hard. It staggered the little gent momentarily, but he was used to this kind of thing and he was back at once jutting his jaw and wiping a sleeve over his face.

"Go back where yuh come from, yuh loco buzzard!"

"String 'im up! String th' son up an' the hell with 'im!"

The sheriff was pushing his way through the crowd now, amid the jeering and the threats. He was pushing up onto the veranda, and the gents he pushed were cleared easily, for the sheriff was a bull of a man.

"I told yuh," he was muttering through hard-tight lips, "tuh shut that damn' trap o' yourn—an' I wasn't talkin' just tuh hear myself talk!"

He jabbed out a paw at the little gent and got him in a grip of steel by the shoulder. Half the little gent's coat was bunched up in the lawman's fist and a sizeable piece of his flesh had been gouged from his neck as one of the sheriff's fingernails had clamped down.

The kid had kept coming along the boardwalk, with the little smile on his wide mouth, with the big bundles carried carelessly. With his eyes on the business at the saloon.

His steps slowed slightly as the sheriff jammed the little gent through the crowd into the dust of the street. And when the sheriff gave the little guy a very hard shove that sent him sprawling on his face beside the boardwalk, the kid came to a stop.

"Take it easy, sheriff," the kid said. With the smile still there, but in a hollow way.

Sheriff Dillon stopped in his tracks and whirled on the kid as though the kid had hit him with a rock.

"You keep yore trap shet too, Williams!" the lawman roared. "Don't you go stickin' yuhr iron in th' fire now, or I'll run you in too!"

The kid's eyes wrinkled up then, above the hollow smile. Wrinkled up under the eyes, like a half squint would look. The kid adjusted one of the packages under his left arm. He stepped down in the dust and deliberately helped the little gent to his feet.

The sheriff was on him with a bound.

With one big paw he was shoving young Williams back onto the boardwalk, with the other he had clamped down on the little gent again.

The kid lost his balance as he tried to step back up onto the boardwalk, caught himself just in time.

"Don't you go gettin' funny, Williams!" a shout came from the saloon veranda.

And Ace Blackwell, who handled the gambling concession at the saloon and who was at the moment leaning against a veranda post, could be heard timed into the subsequent quiet,

"Williams is going to play around, he's going to get hurt one of these times."

"Yeah," the man he'd spoken to out of the corner of his mouth rejoined.

Ace Blackwell peered quietly out from under his tilted-forward dark-brown stetson. His pin-point dark eyes flickered brief amusement as he accomplished a very careful inhale on a quarter-inch of quirley.

Young Williams went to the hitch-rack, untied his horse, stepped aboard as he swung it out.

The sheriff hounded and heaved the little guy to the jailhouse and slammed him therein.

The crowd split, spread, went in for a drink and talk on the business mostly.

A VERY serious youngster rode into town the next morning. There was no softness, no humor, no sociability in the lines of his face. He was of medium height, on the short side of that, and his dress was non-descript. Maybe he was a cowhand roving, maybe he was a trail orphan, maybe he was a wild bunch hanger-on out of work, or a lone-wolf gunman. It would have been hard to say, looking at him, hearing him order up at the saloon.

He wore a gun. He had not done much laughing in his life. He kept you wondering about him. —That was all you were sure about him.

There weren't many at the saloon at that hour of the day. Two or three at the tables, two or three along the bar. And Ace Blackwell came in as the youngster tossed off his third straight one and went into the office in the rear with only a passing glance at the youngster.

"How much?"

The bartender looked at the button, stated deliberately what was owed.

"That whiskey isn't worth it," the kid said. He tossed, however, the right number of coins on the counter, reached in a breast pocket for the makings.

The bartender was a hard-faced gent, but one eye-brow seemed to raise at this.

"No?"

"No," the youngster said. He had a quiet voice, an almost dead voice; seemed not to be interested in what he was saying, much less in what anybody else might be saying.

The bartender kept his cold eyes on the kid, saying nothing. He'd cowed some tough gents in his day with that look.

After a minute the bartender said: "Mebbeso you come from country where they have good whiskey."

The kid must not have heard. He took his cigarette out of his mouth and glanced briefly around the room. Then he went out through the batwings, so that the bartender had to say it fast to make it reach the kid in time:

"Tough son, ain't yuh—"

The kid was moving along the boardwalk. His eyes were squinted straight up the street seeing nobody, or looking down briefly as he'd take his cigarette out of his mouth with thumb and forefinger now and then.

He went directly to the bank. He asked to see the president of the bank. They told him they'd have to know

his business before they could arrange such an interview.

The kid looked at them. Only for a moment. Then he opened the door to the president's office and went in, with the cashier bustling after him.

"Listen, you—" the cashier began.

The president of the bank, Len Berryman, had a round head and a round belly. And very bright blue eyes, very shrewd blue eyes. He had a little hair arranged neatly across his dome, too, arranged for maximum effect. He did not stand up, nor show fear or surprise when the kid came in.

"What I'm here for," the kid said, "is to buy a place. Mebbeso you can sell me one."

Berryman was smoking a neat quirley himself. He drew on it thoughtfully.

He said: "This isn't the way we usually conduct a property sale."

The kid was lighting another quirley, had taken a corner of the desk as his chair.

"However," the banker said abruptly, "I think I'll have something later today, or tomorrow, for you." He turned to the cashier, who'd stood uncertain all this time in the doorway. "You may go, Mace."

"One of our, ah, citizens, an elderly gentleman, is, ah, leaving town today or tomorrow—and I expect to, ah, acquire his place."

"Very interesting," the kid said dully. He looked the banker straight in the eyes. "I'm not interested in the story behind it. All I want to do is buy a place."

The banker held up his cigarette on its way to his mouth. His expression remained brightly pleasant. Then he took another draw.

"What is your name, young man?"

"Bill Daly. What's yours?"

The banker's eyes seemed to twinkle at this.

"Berryman is my name," he said quietly.

"So now we know each other," Bill Daly said. "And now about that place—"

YOUNG Dave Williams rode out to Mary Price's that evening. At first Mary and her dad and Dave sat around on the veranda talking and smoking. And then later Mary and Dave walked out a ways in the moonlight.

Mary had a lot of tight blond curls and they shone like white gold in the night. She looked up at the stars and it was so very quiet out there and she said huskily,

"It's so lovely, isn't it?"

Dave said, "Yes it is." He looked up, around at the stars as she was doing.

She took his arm, still looking up. "And you're so very sweet."

"Oh," he said.

"But you shouldn't always bring me so many things."

"I shouldn't?"

"No you shouldn't. Supposedly, Mr. Williams, we're saving our money to get married. Don't you remember?"

"Well now that you mention it I do remember."

She squeezed his arm hard. He pulled his lips in a little then.

He said quietly, "They threw the old man in jail yesterday."

She let go of his arm, turned to him.

"You mean old Dawson?" She almost whispered it.

He nodded tightly.

"He was talking again?"

"And how." They were moving forward very slowly, she studying his eyes hard. "He named some names." Williams looked at the girl. "Like Crandall and Shadlow and Berryman and Wheeler."

She said, "Oh."

He told her what happened. Squinting up ahead mostly. Her expression became more and more worried, and she had brought them almost to a stop.

"You tried to help him, but nobody went along with you, huh?"

Williams humphed.

"Hardly."

Mary Price looked down distressfully.

"Oh dear. Oh dear." She searched Dave Williams' eyes again. "And he's so right," she murmured. "The old fellow is so right. But nobody sees it yet."

They told Price about it when they got back. Price had one of the largest spreads around Simpson, was a highly respected citizen, but he was not a man for mixing in politics. He shook his head once, pulling at his cold pipe. He was as tall a man as Dave Williams, had the same lank face and grey eyes.

He looked into the fire for a full five minutes, and Dave and Mary looked there too.

Old Price said slowly, "We'd all be signin' our own death warrants on this range if we tried interferin' now."

AS THE men began gathering quietly in front of the saloon, Ace Blackwell said,

"I notice Dave Williams ain't joinin' us." And his eyes roved the crowd for reaction.

A couple of the men looked at each other. One of them said,

"No, he ain't, that's right."

There was a silence. The horses milled impatiently. At least two dozen riders had joined the group; other citizens, women mostly, had come to windows and doors to watch wordlessly. Lights in windows were dim, or out.

One of the riders said: "Williams ain't the only one didn't come. The hell with it."

There was another silence. This seemed to take all right, for another townsman said,

"Yeah, the hell with it. Let's get on with the job."

"Yeah."

"Hell yes."

Ace Blackwell turned, led the way reluctantly.

He said, "I knew Dave Williams wouldn't have the guts for it."

Another gent laughed, with a strangely hollow sound in the night quiet of the street.

"You're just jealous he got Mary Price away from yuh, Blackwell," the gent laughed.

"You shut your trap," Ace Blackwell said to this gent, pulling his mount in halfway, but others quieted the thing and the business moved ahead.

They spread out when they neared the jailhouse. The man with a rope ran it through his fingers once as it hung there on his saddle, as though for the feel of it, as though to make sure finally that it was a good rope for the job.

The sheriff, strangely, was not on hand at the jail. They moved inside, got the old man, brought him out with no trouble. Once the old gent must have wrestled his captors a little, for there was the sound of a hard slap, but the thing went ahead after that without further incident.

It might have gone ahead that way directly to the cottonwood outside town if it hadn't been for this new kid, Bill Daly.

Bill Daly had been eating throughout at the restaurant. He'd been the only one in there, and the proprietor had tried to hurry him so he could join the mob, but Bill Daly had refused to hurry.

"Listen, friend," Bill Daly said, "I paid for this meal, and I intend to eat it in my good time."

The proprietor had glared. And Bill Daly had looked up chewing a great piece of steak.

"What's the big hurry?" Bill Daly asked, "The saloon'll keep."

And the proprietor had glared again. He'd gone to the window, peered under leveled palm along the street. And he'd taken his apron off and gone and got his stetson and gunbelt.

Seeing this, chewing calmly, contentedly, Bill Daly said,

"Something big going on in town tonight?"

The proprietor flashed the glare again.

"Yeah," he husked, "somethin' big."

"So," Bill Daly nodded.

Bill Daly saw *how* big when he stepped out onto the boardwalk. The proprietor had put out the lights, locked the door quickly behind him. Had got his horse at the hitchrack as the mob moved down the street in this direction.

Bill Daly had stopped dead in his tracks. At sight of the mob.

At sight of the rope the rider in the vanguard was fingering eagerly.

At sight of the little old man they dragged from the jailhouse across the street. . . .

THEY weren't four men who had planned to work together to take over the Simpson range. Quite the contrary; each of them had originally planned to rule the rich country himself.

It had gone that way, that was all. There were the four of them, and they quickly recognized each other for what they were, and gradually it worked out: they saw that either one of them was going to have to wipe out the other three—or all of them were going to have to team up and split the booty four ways.

The meetings, which they held at fairly regular intervals, had also come about thus. Not planned exactly, just came into being by a natural sequence of events.

Berryman, who owned the bank; Crandall, who owned the store and the hotel; Wheeler, who owned the newspaper; and Shadlow who owned the saloon and hired the needed gun-experts. And all four of them, who owned the law, and more recently—as the little old gent had claimed—who actually owned every citizen in the town and every rancher on the range.

And there was of course Ace Blackwell, who primarily was Shadlow's right-hand man, secondarily controller of the gambling concession. And going thereon down the line, there were the townsmen like the bartender and the restaurant proprietor, and some of the cowmen and many of their crew-hands, who'd either been influenced by Wheeler's *Clarion,* or by Shadlow's guns, or Blackwell's loans, or, as in most cases, simply by seeing plainly that either you ran with Berryman, Crandall, Wheeler, and Shadlow or you didn't run with them—that, in other words, either you survived on Simpson range or you ended in ruin or boothill.

It was like that, then, in Simpson; as bad as that. And yet no townsman would have told you things were so very bad. No townsman would have become very hot over the taxes, or the fact that, if he thought about it, he was not free to breathe even without the sanction of the Big Four. The citizens of Simpson actually were not aware of the thing; it had come up very slowly, very insidiously, until it was there tight around them, there to stay and to grow tighter and harder.

And the citizens, the few like, say, old Price, who saw the fact of the thing, who faced the actuality of it, saw also that it was already too late to fight—saw that even a harmless old gopher like the "loco little sky-pilot" was

stopped dead in his tracks the moment there was a hint of serious opposition in his conduct. . . .

They met at Berryman's place this night. Wheeler rode in first; Crandall five minutes later; and Shadlow a full half hour later, as usual.

Berryman pulled on a cigar, moving deliberately back and forth in front of the fireplace; Wheeler, a craggy man in his fifties with lines in his face like badland gullies, sat content to stare into the flames, leaning slightly forward; Crandall, a smooth-faced, average-dark man with spots of color high on his cheekbones, drew at a quirley; as did Shadlow, who was like a small edition of his segundo Blackwell.

And because Berryman was also mayor of Simpson he always lead the discussion.

It was never lengthy. It never concerned very vast policy, nor questions that might become wordy such as might have to do with morals or ethics or reform.

It was usually one of two things, or both: (1) which of them would take the latest spread to go on their altar, that Berryman had foreclosed on, or Wheeler had wrecked with verbal vitriol, or Crandall had sued for an unpaid bill or had carried too long on credit, or Shadlow had smashed through Blackwell at the latter's gambling tables; or (2) who was the next Simpson citizen to be broken, or wiped out, or sold out, or railroaded out. . . .

"They're removing the old gent tonight, eh?" was the way Wheeler summed up that business, directing his question at Shadlow.

"Yeah," was Shadlow's last word on it. He took a long inhale, quirked it out of one corner of his mouth not completely taken in.

"What was it Blackwell was telling me this afternoon about this young Williams?" Berryman directed his question to Shadlow also.

"Awg," Shadlow made a deprecatory gesture with his quirley hand. "Williams is nothin'. Blackwell is kind on th' skirt, that Mary Price, an' he wants tuh cut down on Williams before Williams stakes claim on 'er."

Berryman turned his cigar in his soft lips.

"Oh," he said.

Crandall's eyes were narrowed at Berryman.

"Ain't none of us," he said softly then, "ever got nothin' on old Price."

There was a meaningful silence.

"No," Berryman said. He looked at Crandall. "Except taxes. I am raising the taxes on large spreads next week."

Wheeler nodded slowly.

"Mebbe it's time we cut out a section of his beef one of these dark nights," Shadlow interposed. "Th' less he takes tuh market next month, th' less he's goin' tuh have on hand tuh meet taxes."

The other three looked into the fireplace, while Berryman did the deciding on this turning his cigar gently.

"U'm," he said.

"Yeah," Crandall looked to Berryman for his reaction.

"Maybe you might be thinking about that, Shadlow," Berryman said.

"Yeah," Crandall said.

So a meeting went like that. With all four of the men, with the possible exception of Shadlow, somehow awkward at their deviltry, like small boys, with all of them stiff with it like as though none of them could quite believe yet that you could take over a whole prosperous range from actual grown men so simply, so easily, so directly.

And finally Berryman would clear his throat and say,

"Well—I judge that about covers everything. And—ahem—the women folks should be comin' back any min-

ute now."

And the others would leave. As cozy and homey as that. Just a group of the town fathers, the leading men of the town, getting together for a business meeting.

No, none of them typical range-hogs; none of them the typical range-baron who moved in on a town behind guns and took it and ruled it by sheer force. No, this was much subtler, much more insidious, much harder to fight; these were the small-time range-barons, and, paradoxically, therefore bigger and more powerful, more safely entrenched, than the notorious gun-king kind. . . .

BILL DALY was directly across the street from it when they started scrabbling the little old gent onto the horse. He was there when they slammed the old gent on the head with a balled fist to slow down his struggles.

Bill Daly's eyes were not funny to look at in that moment. There was untold history behind the look that came into them; there was knowledge of the extent of horror men were able to achieve; there was terror in his eyes, and fury, and hatred; but mainly there was fury.

Before any of the riders knew what was happening, Bill Daly was in their midst. Before most of them could see what Bill Daly was doing, he had the little old gent down off the horse on his two feet, and he had shoved the two working the graybeard over so hard that they were both scrambling, reaching back, trying to save themselves from crashing back among the milling horses' hoofs.

And he had let a third son who'd come in at him have a short uppercut that dropped him limp at Daly's feet as though the man had been lifted with a meat cleaver instead of a fist.

"What the hell do you men think you're doing anyway," Bill Daly said tensely. He stood there among them, they must have numbered more than a score, and he flung it at them. One of them has his sixgun out and up, others were reaching, when Blackwell pushed his mount in to pull up in a half circle between the lined sixguns and Bill Daly.

"And who the hell," Blackwell replied in equally quiet tones, "do you figure you are to bust in on this party, friend?"

"He's a new one in town! He et at my place," the restaurant proprietor put in lamely.

Bill Daly had fastened his burning gaze on Blackwell.

"Party, you call it," Bill Daly said. "That is a very pretty term. Party. You figure to take an old man out and hang him, and you call it a party." He sucked his lips in trying to control himself, for Bill Daly appeared to have so much to say that he could scarcely say any of it, as though to let it out at all he'd explode.

The bartender, who was on a horse behind Bill Daly now, smiled nastily.

"Yuh don't sound so damned big an' silent now, son," he said.

"String th' pilgrim up along with th' graybeard!" one of the men put in quickly.

"Quiet," Blackwell said. He shifted slightly with a movement of his horse's restless hoofs. "Look," he said to Bill Daly. "Look, friend. How about you get out of our way now, so we can get along with our business."

"I don't know what the old man was in jail for," Bill Daly resumed as if he hadn't heard Blackwell, "but I do know that he's a human being, and that makes him entitled to justice by law. By *law*, not by a hangnoose mob—"

Blackwell was transfixing Bill Daly. He had become very calm. The men were shifting restlessly, as were the horses. Then Blackwells eye flickered

over Bill Daly's shoulder at the bartender.

Bill Daly was evidently a lad who could feel a thing like this coming almost instinctively. Who could feel the signal in a look that, to an ordinary man, would have been no signal at all; who could feel the nature of the thing that the signal would bring. Bill Daly had swung with the speed of a light-flicker, with the obscurity of a shadow; Bill Daly had brought his six-gun into line and had torn the saddle-rifle, that the bartender had raised to use as a club on Daly's head, from the saloonman's fingers with one placed bullet.

The wood of the rifle could be heard as it split; the metal of the weapon half clanged; the bartender lost his balance from surprise at the sudden move, had started to fall from his mount until another man put out a supporting hand.

BILL DALY used another bullet then, not so generously. Bill Daly saw the other gent drawing a bead on his head, and Bill Daly smashed a bullet through this gent's heart.

And certainly in the same split instant Bill Daly had angled his gun flush on Blackwell's chest before Blackwell could haul his own iron completely clear of leather.

"I warn you, hombre," Bill Daly's voice was intoning in the backwash of gun-sound; "if another of your men draws a gun on me, you get it dead-center."

Blackwell spotted the half dozen guns coming out, dropped his weapon back into holster and raised a hand quickly.

"Put the guns away!" Blackwell stormed, and with the vigor of his command he obviously sought to rekindle his own courage. "Put 'em away!"

The men looked puzzled at their leader as they leathered their iron. They were not used to putting their guns away until they'd done a job with them. They were not used to backing down before anybody, these Blackwell segundos.

"What th' hell—" one of them growled.

"Quiet!" Blackwell stormed. He settled his eyes abruply on Bill Daly. He said, "All right, friend. You win the first round." He whirled on his mates again. "All right, put the gray-beard back in the hoosegow! And that's all for tonight!"

One of Blackwell's segundos, before he turned his mount away, flung at Bill Daly:

"We'll be back, pilgrim—an' mebbe th' next hangrope party will be for two instead o' one!"

"Some new kid," Dave Williams said through his teeth to Mary Price; he looked down his nose at the piece of grass and put it back in the corner of his mouth and chewed it thoughtfully. He looked at Mary. "Bill Daly, they're saying his name is."

Mary Price let out her breath for the first time since Dave Williams had arrived and started talking. She let it out slow and gentle. She sat down on the veranda steps and then he did too.

"Oh thank goodness," she breathed. "Thank goodness they didn't—didn't go through with it." But her frown deepened again before it had begun to relax. "But what will happen now, Dave—surely they won't give the old man a fair trial simply because this new kid tells them to. . . ."

Dave Williams tightened his teeth on the straw.

"Yeah," he said. "What will happen now is the thing."

Later, he said good-night Mary and he rode away slowly. Gazing at nothing straight ahead, squinting into the

dark night, chewing the piece of straw.

"Yeah," he murmured half-aloud, "what happens now is the thing. . . ."

It was funny. A guy was a youngster, and then he grew up a little, and then he grew up some more, and before he knew it he wasn't a button any more, he was a man, with a man's responsibilities.

A guy went along day after day, learning to ride, learning how to be a cowman, learning how to shoot.

A guy went along day after day, and he got very good with a gun—on tincans and coins tossed into the air—and he knew that one of these days he was probably going to have to use that gun for something besides a tincan or a coin, but a guy did not really think about it at all.

A guy saw other men around him who had lived a long ripe life not marked with the scars of serious gunplay, and a guy consequently figured mebbeso he'd live a life like that too.

And then a thing like this came along. A thing like this that reminded a guy that he was not a button any more, but a man.

A thing like this that reminded a guy that a man worth the name was a guy who had a few principles that he lived by, like common decency and justice and fair play and tolerance. . . .

Dave Williams put his horse away. He went in his house. He got ready for bed. And he did not sleep much this night.

Dave Williams tried the action of his gun before he dropped it into his holster the next morning.

Dave Williams figured he would pay the mayor of Simpson a little call. . . .

THE mayor of Simpson was not in his office at the bank, however, when Dave Williams rode into town shortly after nine o'clock.

The mayor of Simpson was in the office of Shadlow, the saloonman, and he was not his usual cool, calculating self. The mayor of Simpson was in a very uncharacteristic mood—

"The hell with it!" Mayor Berryman thundered. "The hell with the people! You can string the oldster up tonight and you can string this Daly up—tomorrow night."

Shadlow kept shuffling the cards slowly, dropping them together, slopping one or two of them from the pack now and then, reassembling them and shuffling them deliberately again. He raised his eyes shrewdly to Berryman, after glancing briefly at Blackwell, who stood at his left, and at two segundos who waited in the shadows on his right.

"You know me, Berryman," Shadlow said slowly. "I'm a man who likes action." He dropped his eyes briefly to the cards, raised them again to the banker's. "But it ain't goin' to be smart to do it like that this time. This is once I say do it straight through the law. Try the graybeard for disturbin' the peace, then give him twenty-four hours tuh get out of town. Try this Daly kid for murder, and let the people hang him."

"Shadlow, I'm telling you, this is no time to backslide! The people are talking, and they're talking plenty. Show them you fear them at this time, and we're through!"

Berryman was bursting with excitement. His face was red and round, and the big veins stood out on his sweating forehead. He tried to control himself, and he swiped at his forehead with his handkerchief.

Shadlow had not removed his snake-eyes from Berryman's face. He smiled a little now in one corner of his mouth.

"You're goin' tuh bust a blood-vessel, yuh keep on shoutin' like that, Berryman," he said quietly.

Berryman ended a long tight sigh, drawing himself up tensely. When he

spoke it was in more controlled tones:

"Shadlow, I've talked to Crandall and Wheeler. They say what I say, to the hilt. —And here you are, the one who always wants action—

"We aren't going to shut the people up doing it pretty now, Shadlow. They aren't all dumb. They know Blackwell engineered that hangnoose party, and they know Blackwell is in your hire, and they know you and Crandall and Wheeler and I run this town together—"

Shadlow slammed the deck of cards down on the table, rose to his feet.

"Okay, okay, okay." He let these out in a descending tone, so that the last one was scarcely a whisper. He placed the deck of cards at the back of the desk, pushed his stetson back slightly, looked up at Berryman with a wan smile. "Okay, Mr. Berryman. Action it will be. But don't say I didn't warn yuh—"

DAVE WILLIAMS came out of the bank slowly, stepped down onto the boardwalk. And he pushed the thought back, but it persisted: *You made your try now, son. You tried to take a hand. You can't spend the day here, chasing the mayor around town, trying to track him down. You got a spread of your own, you got work to do. . . .*

Dave Williams stood there in front of the bank a moment, looking up the clean morning street. Then he yanked his hat forward, got aboard his mount and rode out of town as deliberately as he had come. . . .

Blackwell, standing on the saloon veranda, having just come through the batwings, put the quirley back in his mouth. He went down the boardwalk toward the hotel. He went into the hotel, lined up three gunmen behind him as he entered with a look.

He said to the clerk in a slow drawl, "Which room is this Daly occupyin'?"

"Twenty-four."

Blackwell said, "Let's go."

And the three gunmen, each Colt-hung on both hips, followed him up the steps. The upper hallway was dark, the faint morning light streaming weakly from one dirty window at the top of the staircase.

"One of you on each side of the door," Blackwell murmured as they reached twenty-four. "One of yuh behind me with both guns out and up."

BLACKWELL palmed his own big black .45. Then he put foot up, drew back the knee and let go with his heavy heel. And the flimsy door splintered open before him with a crash.

Daly, lying on top of his made bed, had come to a sitting position in a sweep that was timed simultaneous with the door crashing open. He sat there, with a hand on the edge of the bed lightly on each side of him, with his whole pose quietly, calmly light.

"Get up, Daly," Blackwell said. And when Bill Daly said nothing and did nothing, Blackwell added: "You're under arrest. For the murder of Bill Garnett."

Bill Daly's cold grey eyes searched Blackwell's face calmly.

"Where is your badge, hombre?" Bill Daly said quietly. "I don't see it."

"I said get up, Daly."

There were three guns lined directly on Bill Daly, one in Blackwell's right hand, two in the hands of the segundo.

Bill Daly suddenly dove directly in the face of all three weapons. He aimed a right fist at Blackwell's jaw and he carried this off, but bullets slammed him as he came. He hit Blackwell so hard on the point of the jaw that Blackwell lost his gun after his first shot and crashed back into the segundo.

Such a move as this the segundo was schooled in watching for. And the segundo almost got back in time from Blackwell's buckling body, and he almost kept his guns clear and lined on Daly. But not quite.

Bill Daly grabbed Blackwell's gun in mid-air, and lost it within the same instant as a bullet from the segundo's left gun made a chance hit on Daly's grabbing wrist, sending the Colt spinning again.

The segundo was back and in the clear then. The two segundos outside had come into the doorway with two guns each out.

Bill Daly, with several bullets in his body now, and the bullet through his left wrist, had snatched up Blackwell's gun now with his right hand. And crouched there beside Blackwell's prostrate body, Bill Daly shot it out with the three segundos.

Or more accurately, Bill Daly slammed five bullets at the three segundos and he dropped two of them dead in their tracks. But this only while the three segundos poured at least a dozen bullets into Bill Daly's head and heart. . . .

The shooting brought a crowd; brought Shadlow with a dozen henchmen; brought the sheriff, who turned his attention at once to keeping the crowd back.

Ten minutes after Shadlow entered the hotel he came out with Blackwell, followed by the henchmen carrying the two dead segundos and the corpse of Bill Daly.

A murmur ran through the crowd at sight of Bill Daly. One voice was clearly heard:

"It's th' kid that stopped them from hangin' th' old gent—"

"Shut up, all of yuh!" the sheriff shouted. "An' yuh can clear out now —all of yuh!"

The crowd did not shut up and it was in no hurry to clear out. The murmur spread along the street, and the lawman's repeated shouted warnings did not quiet it much. There were grim faces in the groups that gathered along the boardwalk, and the grimness did not lessen when the sheriff "deputized" a number of Shadlow's gunmen to break up the groups. . . .

AT TEN-THIRTY Berryman and Wheeler and Crandall and Shadlow were putting their heads together again in an emergency meeting. There in the office of the *Clarion,* Berryman was in the chair in front of the rolltop desk, Wheeler was standing with his back to the wall smoking deliberately, Crandall was pacing awkwardly, Shadlow was in the corner beyond Wheeler plucking a quirley butt from his lips. The light in the room came from the one high window at the left of the desk, and the view from here was a narrow alley that led out onto the badlands.

Berryman was saying, "You got to do it with the *Clarion,* Wheeler. You got to tell the citizens that this Bill Daly was a loco trail-orphan who'd come to Simpson to murder and plunder, and he'd started right in—"

Shadlow said quietly, "That loco line was what yuh used on the graybeard. Mebbe the citizens will figure it's kind o' funny, callin' every man who tries tuh buck us 'loco.' "

Wheeler said, "Who was this Daly anyway? How come he busted in on the hangnoose party in the first place?"

Shadlow said, "Blackwell said he never saw eyes like Daly's that night. Said the kid must of had an old man who was strung up, or a brother, or somethin'. Sight of that hangrope seemed like it drove him off his bat, Blackwell said."

"He should never have been permitted to enter the town," Berryman said nervously.

Shadlow humphed slowly.

"Yuh got a town," he said, "yuh got to expect new citizens tuh arrive now an' then."

Berryman was rubbing his fingers together. Wheeler was staring at Berryman. Crandall kept up his jerky pacing. Shadlow stood there in the corner and contributed his half-amused Satanic glance. And that was when the rock came crashing through the big front window.

Berryman was on his feet as if he'd been shot.

"Now what the hell," he husked, "is that?"

Shadlow pushed away from the wall. He walked over and picked up the rock and he looked at it and he tossed it onto Wheeler's desk.

"There yuh are, Wheeler," Shadlow said softly, "do an editorial on that."

Berryman whirled on Shadlow.

"You're being very damned funny, Shadlow. This is not a very good time to be funny."

A bullet came next. It must have come through the opening the rock had made, for there was no warning tinkle. It cracked off a splinter of Wheeler's desk, and shouts could be heard outside.

Shadlow forgot about Berryman. He suddenly made for the door in a crouch, and another bullet made a blossoming hole in the front window. Shadlow stood up halfway when he got outside. He took in the situation at a glance.

Several citizens had resisted the deputized Shadlow gunmen, was what had happened. This had led to an open declaration by one townsman that the people of Simpson were sick and tired of being robbed and murdered by the Big Four and their henchmen. And that had been the signal for the sheriff to rush the resisting townsmen, flanked by his "deputies."

THE gunplay that had ensued was what Shadlow found now. At least a dozen townsmen had barricaded themselves behind quickly tumbled haybales, and Shadlow gun-hirelings were getting behind posts, horses, house-corners.

Shadlow moved along the boardwalk close against the falsefronts with his gun out.

And a yell came:

"Down with Berryman, Wheeler, Crandall, and Shadlow! Ride 'em out of town on a rail!"

And as Shadlow reached the center of the stand his crew was making with the sheriff, the sheriff suddenly rushed out into the middle of the street with his hand high in the air.

"Gents! A truce! . . . We ain't goin' tuh get nowhere shootin' at each other, an' callin' our leadin' citizens names—"

The sheriff got his answer in the form of a bullet that lifted his stetson clean off his head.

"Leadin' citizens, hell! Range-barons, yuh mean! *Killers!*"

The lawman looked fit to burst, his face was so crowded with blood.

"Men! Men of Simpson!" he shouted. "Yuh got tuh—"

"We want a free election, lawdog! We want a trial of the men who were set to murder old Dawson and of the men who did murder young Daly!"

Shadlow, having stopped in an alleyway at sight of this, glanced back up the street. More townsmen were coming along the street now, guns out. Shadlow smiled a little, for he recognized the faces of men who'd regularly heckled the old gent when he'd tried to talk before he was thrown in jail.

"We're with yuh in this fight, Shadlow!" one of them called to the latter.

But at the other end of town more citizens were lining up on the other side. More haybales were rolling into

the street, more men were riding into town, swinging down behind the far barricades; and one man was seen to swing aboard and race out the far end of town, plainly to ring in reinforcements from the spreads to the north.

With the smile still on his face, but twisted dry now, Shadlow made it back along the boardwalk before the shooting started up again. He slipped into the *Clarion* office, faced Berryman and Wheeler and Crandall.

"It's a showdown," he announced quietly. "It's either we stay in or we go out." Shadlow searched the eyes of the others ironically. "You better be bucklin' on your guns, gentlemen."

Dave Williams went through the motions of his chores. He kept going through the motions of them. He smoked a great number of quirleys while he did this. He jammed his stetson down with a stiff tug at the lip of it and he'd light another quirley and he made a trip up the line, and then abruptly, about eleven o'clock he turned and drove his mount back to the place at a fast clip.

Maybe it was because, out there, he'd started thinking about Mary. About the life together they were planning. Maybe it was because he got thinking about that, and picturing how it would be, this life together, if they began it on a foundation like this. . . .

Foundation? It was no foundation; it would be no foundation.

He'd swung back then, hard. He'd swung back and ridden hard back to his houses, and he'd swept right on through onto the trail to town. Hadn't had to stop for gun or ammunition—because he'd never left the gun at the house when he'd come back from town, nor had he unloaded the ammunition from his saddleroll.

Dave Williams was smiling, and his smile was pretty broad, as he thundered all-out for the town. . . .

HOT lead ruled in the main street of Simpson that morning. The tide of battle swept first in the favor of the rebels, then in favor of the Big Four. Barricades were suddenly abandoned, and Shadlow's men took up positions behind former townsmen barricades, and later, townsmen took up new positions behind recaptured Shadlow barricades.

And by eleven o'clock Shadlow saw that this wearing-down, back-and-forth war would finally go in favor of the rebel townsmen, for their numbers were greater, were constantly on the increase, and their spirit was not at all lagging.

And so by eleven o'clock Shadlow saw that he must act and act fast. In a swift crouch he sped back from his barricades, under cover of clouds of dust and gunsmoke, and made it to the emporium.

Crandall, he remembered, had stashed emergency dynamite in the rear room, and it was for this that Shadlow headed, quickly.

He kicked in the front window, dove through, smashed on through two flimsy doors inside to the rear. His smile was hard, cold, satanic. Crandall.

Crandall, he thought; and Wheeler; and Berryman. And where the hell were they in this fight. Still buckling on their guns, no doubt; still searching for some deadly bullets to put in their guns.

Shadlow let out a hollow, raspy laugh. *The damned rotten yellow-bellies* . . .

The hell with them. He, Shadlow, would win the war, would take Simpson, lock, stock, and barrel, and he'd rule it alone. . . .

He stuffed the dynamite into pockets, under his arms, into a sack that he

slung over his shoulder. He was out into the street again, spotted a horse-shape in the smoke and dust, swung his sack up on the saddle and swung aboard jabbing the horse with his long-tooth spurs as he floundered onto its flank.

The first alleyway he could detect on the opposite side of the street, Shadlow headed for; then pulled the horse up on an impulse, rode up the street until he reached his own barricades. And when he found Blackwell on one knee behind a high pile of haybales, he explained to him quickly, in a shout that was half-drowned in gun-sound, what his idea was.

Blackwell saluted with a knowing grin, shouted back:

"Nice figurin', Chief!"

And as bullets started to search Shadlow out of the billowing smoke and dust, the man whirled and raced up the street again, turned into the alleyway he'd previously selected.

It was behind the office of the *Clarion* that he pulled his mount in cruelly again. It was behind the opening that led into the window beside Wheeler's desk.

Shadlow grinned evilly; he saw the figures moving around there in the office; and he thus saw confirmed what he'd known in advance: that Berryman and Wheeler and Crandall were sitting out the fight, leaving it all up to him, Shadlow.

Shadlow lighted a cigarette first. He lighted a stick of dynamite from it. He calmly watched the fuse fizzle down close to the stick, keeping back from the line of vision from the office window, and then he slung the stick of dynamite directly at the window.

"There yuh are, partners! An' it ain't a rock this time!"

The explosion rocked Shadlow and the horse back as he urged the beast out onto the plain. But in a minute

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Shadlow had the animal under control, heading straight out again, and he was hammering in a half-circle around the far end of the town then—coming back in behind the rebel citizens' barricades, pulling another stick of dynamite from a pocket as he rode.

The first stick he threw into the ranks of the rebels fell short. The horse, scary now, jerked just at the moment of Shadlow's throw, and the blast served only to warn the rebel townsmen what was coming and knocked several of them to the ground.

Shadlow, however, was unperturbedly lighting another stick from his cigarette, which he kept between his teeth, and wielding it, he shifted the quirley to the side of his lips and rasped his demand:

"Surrender, yuh fools—or be blown tuh kingdom come!"

DAVE WILLIAMS thought about it many times in later years. Very many times.

How he'd gone through his chores that morning, how he'd kept telling himself (or rather, *trying* to tell himself):

If there's going to be trouble, there's going to be trouble; if the people aren't going to rebel against the Big Four, they aren't going to rebel—and nothing I do either way is going to make the least bit of difference. I couldn't make them rebel if they didn't feel it within themselves, and if they did rise up behind guns, the help my one gun would give them wouldn't mean a thing. . . .

Dave Williams remembered that voice that had kept talking in the back of his mind—and he remembered with more gratitude than self-congratulation that he'd finally ignored the voice.

For it was Dave Williams, Dave Wil-

liams alone, Dave Williams and his one six-gun, to whom they gave credit for the salvation of Simpson—to whom they gave full credit for saving and freeing the whole town and the whole range.

He'd come over the last rise above town just as Shadlow had come around behind the rebels with the dynamite. He'd seen, then, for the first time the smoke of battle within the town, as he had begun to hear the sounds of it a few moments before.

And he'd seen the rider sweeping out from the town and he'd kept on hammering in not knowing whether the rider were friend or foe, and finally he'd recognized the rider as Shadlow.

And when Shadlow brandished the dynamite and shouted his threat, Dave Williams had come close enough to see what was happening though not yet quite close enough to hear Shadlow's shouted threat.

So it was no set-up, even for a man who'd kept his hand in at six-gun handling since he was a button, against when he might really need a six-gun seriously.

Dave Williams moved instinctively. His six-gun was suddenly in his hand and the bullets were lancing surely.

Dave Williams emptied the gun at Shadlow. More specifically, at the stick of dynamite. Dave Williams did not ever know which of his bullets hit the dynamite. . . .

Dave Williams always reddened when they beamed at him in later years, around Simpson, recalling how he'd saved them.

He'd always insisted that it wasn't just him at all, it was also old Dawson, and Bill Daly, and every one of the freedom-loving sons of Simpson, it was all of them who had fought shoulder to shoulder to drive gun-backed greed and injustice from their home range forever. . . .

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Of Complete Western Book Magazine, published Bi-Monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1943.

State of New York, } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Martin Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Complete Western Book Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:
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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is ..... (This information is required from daily publications only.)

MARTIN GOODMAN, Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 17th day of September, 1943. SYLVIA FIEGEN.

[SEAL.]

(My commission expires March 30, 1945.)

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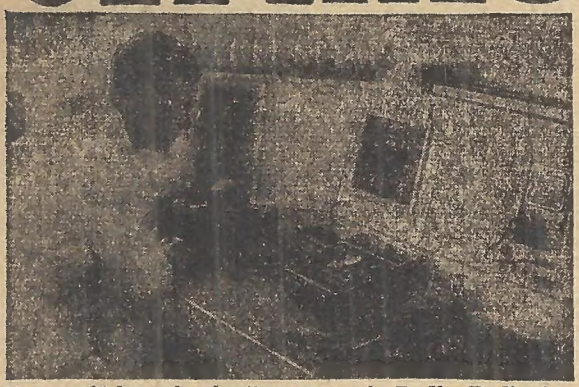

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